American Atheist
magazine reprint

an Atheist Reports from India

Margaret R. Bhatty

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India

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Margaret R. Bhatty

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Introduction

In summer of 1978 the Murray-O'Hairs completed an extended tour of India, meeting all of the executives and many members of the rationalist, free thought, and Atheist groups in that nation. They were met at the airport in Delhi by Joseph Edamaruku, a native of the state of Kerala in South India, and an Atheist leader and author. He then accompanied the Murray-O'Hairs to other of the Indian states where he had made advance arrangements for meetings with the media, state officials, and leaders of the Atheist groups.

Throughout the first part of the visit, he talked extensively of a brave woman who dared to be a critical writer in a nation where passions concerned with religion ran high. As groups were visited in Madras, Bombay, Vijaywada, Calcutta, and Hyderabad, her name came up regularly.

Toward the end of the visit, the Murray-O'Hairs were able to visit with her in her home in Nagpur. Struck by her perceptive analysis of India's multifaceted religious community, knowing that she was a well-reputed author, they asked if she had the time to become a columnist for the *American Atheist* magazine. She was, then, committed to her writing obligations in India. She agreed, however, to consider the idea.

After some extended correspondence, she joined the *American Atheist* staff as a columnist in January 1983, with her "Report from India." From that time to the current d ate, her articles were received

become a reality wilth the commitment of Lawrence Bullock of Australia, Dr. Madalyn O'Hair of the United States, and GORA of India. It was thought that writers from throughout the world could furnish their reports on the actual situation in their nations concerned with separation of government and religion. These articles were to be presented in a quarterly international journal, utilizing native languages where necessary and translations where possible. Alas, this was not to be, as consistent writers could not be found.

Later, Dr. Nawal El Saadawi was able to send, on an irregular basis, "Reports from Egypt," and John Jones from time to time sent "Reports from New Zealand." Only occasionally was an article received from diverse writers of the U.S.S.R., all of whom were associated with NOVOSTI, the official educational outreach of that nation.

Margaret Bhatty, however, was consistent. Each month her column came in regularly. She proved to be the bulwark of hope for the aspiring international Atheist organization. Yet, a request for biographical material from her, when received, proved to be as short, and unassuming but incisive, as her articles. It follows:

> Margaret Bhatty, b. 1931, comes from a missionary family. She is a free-lance journalist and author of books for Indian children in English. She lives in Magpur.
>
> Though reared in a fundamentalist religious environment, she recalls that what shaped her as a concerned member of the human race was the warmth, compassion, and tolerance in her family background. She was encouraged to read and never denied the right to do her own thinking. However, the fear of hell fire and the necessity of guilt as a prerequisite to redemption was deeply instilled. Possibly what made her take a hard look at the conventional Christian concepts she accepted without question was the way they affected women. In this area she was strongly influenced by Bertrand Russell's ideas on Atheism.
>
> As a writer for children in a multi-religious society often torn by hatred and bigotry, she considers her greatest responsibility lies in preventing the on-going process of contamination of young minds with adult prejudice, by offering them sane, secular, and sensible alternatives. She has a son and a daughter who are also Atheists.

The American Atheist Press is very pleased to be able to introduce Margaret Bhatty to the Western world in book form. She is very well known, indeed, to the United States through her writings in the *American Atheist*. Her larger audience can only have a better understanding of India through her analysis of diverse religious incidents revealing thematically a part of what is so schismatic for that nation: its absorption of the unreal of religion into the reality of daily life.

Other Works by The Author

Novels for children:

Himalayan Holiday. New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1974.

The Adventures of Bhim the Bold. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1976.

The Never-Never Bird. Bombay: India Book House Education Trust, 1979.

Up-Country Down-Country. Bombay: India Book House, 1981.

The Secret of Sickle-Moon Mountain. Bombay: India Book House, 1982.

The Mystery of the Zamorin's Treasure. Bombay: India Book House, 1983.

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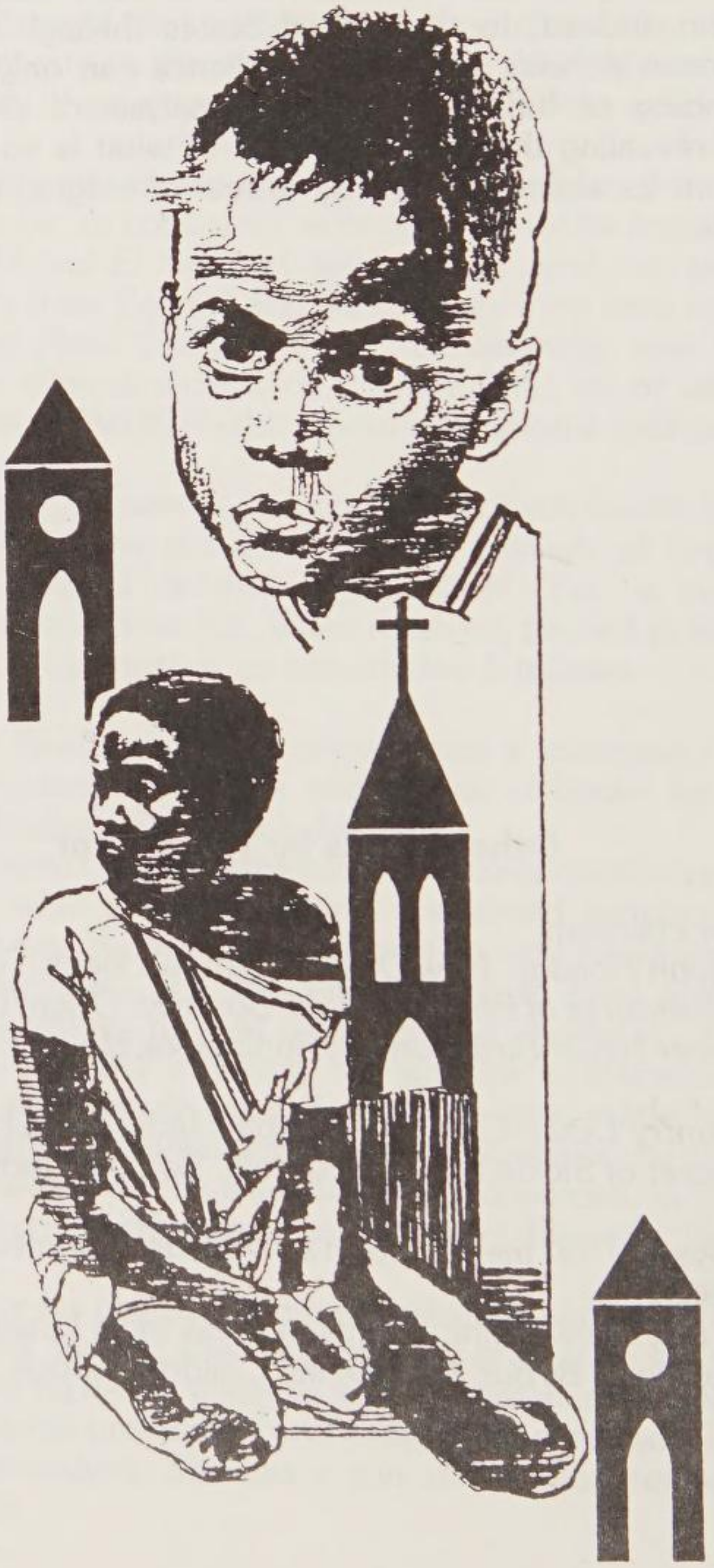


Where Religion Denies Children Happiness

January 1983

There are close to 25,000,000 million orphans and destitute children in India. This is the world's highest average, surpassed only when certain countries are ravaged by war or civil strife.

But adoption is regarded with reservation by most Indians, and few families take orphans. At the same time they are very sensitive about any suggestions that Indian children are being exported as cheap labour or for prostitution through adoption agencies.

Recently, the *Daily Mail* carried a story about trafficking in babies by a Calcutta-based agency called the International Mission of Hope. The American director, Ms. Cherie Volkavitch Clark, age thirty-six, hails from Denver. She finds parents chiefly for disabled children and those abandoned in jails. Twenty percent of the 500 children sent to U.S. homes were disabled in some way. The fee Ms. Clark asks prospective parents to pay for travel and legal formalities was assumed to be the price of a child by the *Daily Mail* correspondent.

This damaging report proved to be incorrect, but it did the children's cause no good either. Other adoption agencies have also come under a cloud. This is because there is an orthodox section in Indian society which opposes adoptions by foreigners for reasons of religion, and the *Daily Mail* report justified their righteous indignation.

The Indian adoption law is almost a century old. Legally, only those professing Hinduism may adopt a child. Other communities are only granted guardianship.

Since few Hindu couples go for adoption, this means that many orphan children are denied homes. Indian society is rigidly set into caste

and subcaste, each with a distinct identity jealously protected by its members. Intercaste marriages are seen as a kind of miscegenation. Adopting a child whose antecedents are suspect also dilutes caste purity.

Indians have a strong tradition of the biological concept of parenthood, whereby a woman is fulfilled and achieves status through maternity, and a man's blood line is secured through paternity.

According to Hindu tradition, marriage is a social obligation, followed by the procreation of children. Children are not born for themselves alone. Instead, they affirm sexual potency so that too many daughters suggests attenuated seed. Caste and community lines are carried on. In-laws are satisfied that the girls they bring home for their sons are fertile and unflawed. Inheritance and property rights are guaranteed. Farmers see children as cheap labour. Pious Hindus are assured salvation if they have sons to carry out the year-long funeral rites after they die, and pray for the manes of the ancestors annualy thereafter.

Indian children are also produced to strike a political balance in numbers between religious groups. Muslim and Roman Catholic priests urge their followers not to practice birth control because it is a "sin" against god. Besides, they argue, producing more of the faithful will make the community bigger and stronger. This has created a backlash among the majority Hindu community which sees itself being swamped out. This is why India's population control program has foundered.

Despite the large number of orphans, few people go for adoption purely for humanitarian reasons. If adoption does take place in a Hindu family, it is in order to fulfill a social requirement. It is regarded as an extreme measure resorted to only because childlessness has persisted. Care is usually taken to ensure that caste and community rules are not infringed.

The traditional attitude prevails that orphans without proof of parentage are "bastard" and carry taint in their blood. Since destitution is identified with crime, adopted children are also likely to prove delinquent.

All these misconceptions lead to some interesting conclusions: Firstly, that the people of India do not share a common humanity, but consist of many distinct species, some superior, some inferior, and described as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, *etc.* Secondly, religion somehow establishes distinct genetic patterns, some superior, some inferior, and "goodness" or "badness" is easily traced to this genetic inheritance!

Middle class couples from orthodox religious backgrounds are so

intimidated by these misconceptions that few take pride in adopting a child. Social workers in orphanages are often asked to go to ridiculous lengths to keep the entire process secret. A prospective mother usually goes away to her parents' home to return after a reasonable absence with the adopted child. In the small and exclusive Parsi community no child is accepted unless born of a Parsi father, and an adopted child cannot even enter a fire temple as a communicant.

Because of such religious prejudices Indian procedures for adoption are the most complicated in the world. There are less stringent laws against drinking, prostitution, and drug trafficking. In 1978 a bill was introduced in parliament to liberalize adoption and make it available to everyone, regardless of religion. It was effectively killed by vigorous lobbying on the part of religious bigots.

Muslims claimed it infringed their personal law which is against adoption. The Koran reference here is one of the filmsiest of any, and derives from the dispute which arose when the Prophet wished to marry the divorced wife of Zayd. Since Zayd happened to be his adopted son, the Prophet dissolved the adoption. This is now regarded as an injunction against adopting children. Muslim Indians are also afraid that any liberal legislation will be the first step towards interference in their religion by the Hindu majority.

Parsi, Hindu, and other bigots voted against the bill in the interests of caste purity. Religious obscurantists thus successfully deprived millions of orphans of the chance for happiness.

The legal position as it now stands is that all destitute orphans, whether abandoned or rescued from garbage cans, are Hindu by religion. And unless Hindu parents come forward to adopt them, they must be maintained in state-run homes where their spiritual inheritance is safeguarded.

The Hindu belief is that one comes into this world not to shape one's destiny, but to endure it. All suffering is predestined according to sins committed in some former existence. One's religious duty is to endure without complaint to ensure an accumulation of merit for a better deal in the next existence.

Such a rationalization of suffering frees one from the uncomfortable necessity of feeling overconcerned about the lot of the less fortunate, since they have only themselves to blame.

Orthodox Hindus are opposed to children being adopted by foreigners because they will then cease to be what has been ordained by their karmic destiny — Hindus, born in India, for unverifiable reasons, in a cycle of existences. Possibly, a short and brutal life in the grey walls

of institutions in subhuman conditions is also part of their destiny.

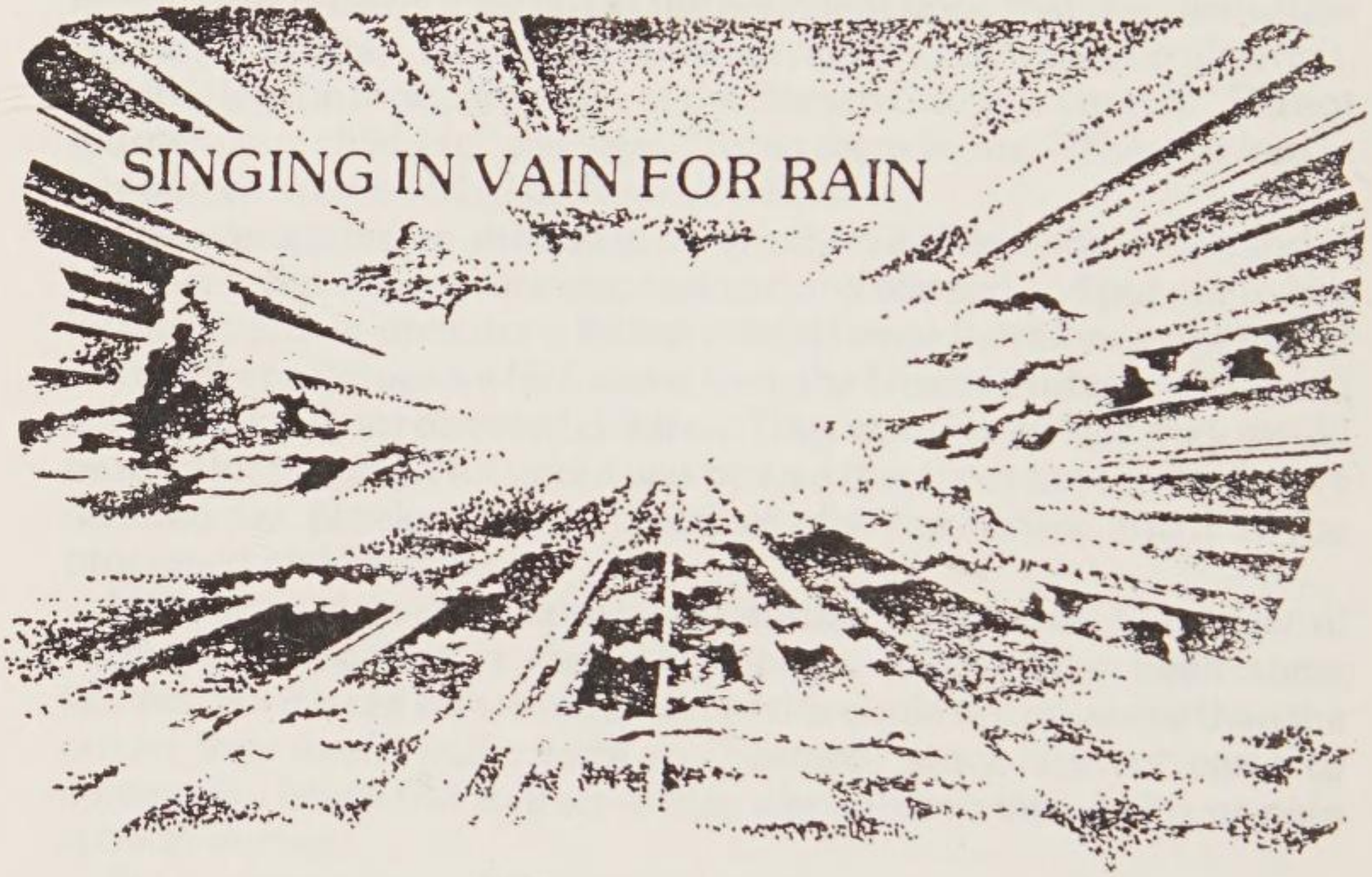
Mother Theresa's work among the dying in Indian cities has been strongly resented by Hindus because of her practice of baptising them before they breathe their last in the confident hope that they will attain heaven thereafter. This is as bad as conversion. Her views on abortion, which is legal in India, are those of the Roman Catholic church. "Do not murder your children," she says. "Bring them to me." The children in her homes are reared to be Roman Catholics.

The average Indian attitude to deformity in a child is that it is a kind of judgment. But children are also maimed and blinded and put out to beg by unscrupulous operators. Indian officials were therefore surprised at the number of appeals which came from the United States and Canada asking specially for disabled children. They were convinced they would be used for begging. Not until it was proved that these applications were dictated by purely altruistic motives did they allow them to be processed and filled.

Meticulous data on children sent abroad has proved that most of them find happiness in their new homes. There have been some failures, but it is still safe to assume that this could not be worse than the odium they would suffer here as "bastard" stock without caste or community labels tied to their ankles when tossed into drains or onto rubbish dumps.

But it will be a long while yet before religious bigotry allows adoption laws to be liberalized, and social attitudes change sufficiently to make people see this problem from a purely humanitarian view.

The Daily Mail. Newspaper. London.


SINGING IN VAIN FOR RAIN

Singing in Vain for Rain

February 1983

The state of Tamil Nadu in south India witnessed religious riots of unusual savagery in 1982 among Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. To undo the effects of Atheism, which has had much success in this area, the Hindus have launched a determined campaign throughout the state. In addition, the conversion of many untouchables to Islam and Christianity (to escape the social stigma Hinduism places on them) resulted in communal strife.

In October, however, all the pious of every persuasion united in a remarkable show of solidarity when they prayed to their individual deities to send rain on the drought-stricken state. Muslims gathered in large numbers for hours of prayer on the scorching beaches of the city of Madras. Christians flocked to churches and cathedrals, and Hindus to their temples.

The city of Madras now faces the severest water shortage in the last twelve years, and the state government decided it must "act" — a term entirely in keeping with the chief minister's status as a film star whose widespread popularity rests on his "good-guy" image over decades of acting in movies.

The scenario was also reminiscent of an Indian film, and set up at much cost to the taxpayer. At dawn, 36 kilometers from Madras, an unusual music recital was held to appease the rain god Varuna at Red

Hills Lake which supplies the city with water.

A violin maestro, Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan, solemnly waded into the shallow water with his fiddle. Among the crowds watching him was the Tamil Nadu Labour Minister and the Chairman of the Madras Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board.

Vaidyanathan was scheduled to play for a fortnight for the edification of the gods. "This *kirtan* [music recital] has potential to cause instant rains to meet the water shortage," said he.

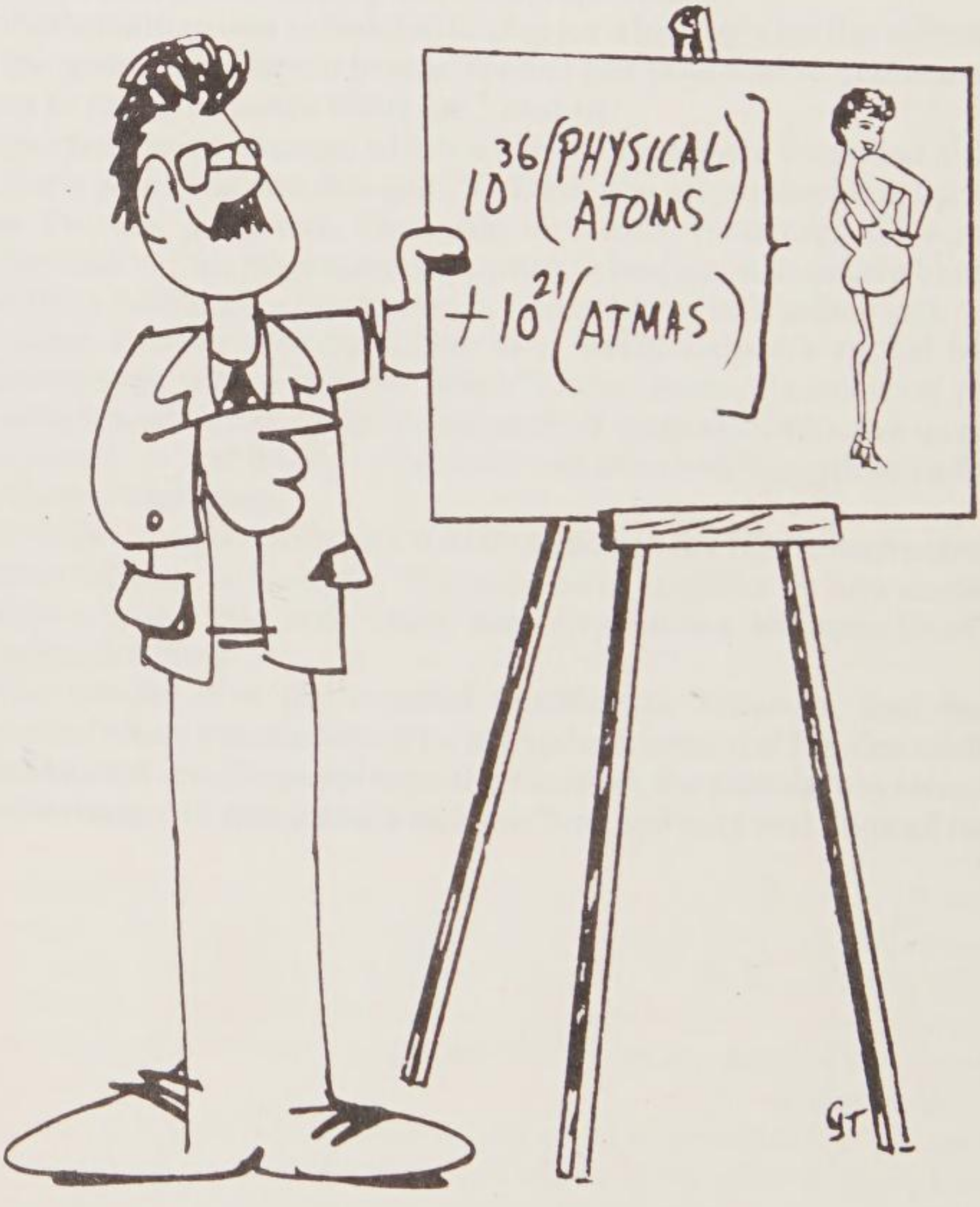
He chose *ragas* (tunes) which a famous composer had used in 1830 during a year of severe drought. "O Devi, you are so merciful, I pray to thee for rain, good rain. Give rain forthwith. Give rain. Give rain." "Whereupon," his biographer recorded, "clouds appeared in a blue sky and there was such a downpour as had seldom been witnessed."

Under another scorching blue sky, Vaidyanathan's recital began appropriately with a number titled "Come down, thunderous rain!" Then followed an invocation to the mother goddess (Mari give us rain). The climax — "Let it rain! — was what would surely bring down a flood.

Nothing happened.

But the state government backed religion to the hilt by instructing all district officials to provide "the necessary facilities to any social or religious group that took upon itself to provoke showers from the cruelly calm skies."

The people of a place called Gudibanda, however, had better success. When the prayers of local Hindu priests and Muslim mullahs failed to elicit any response from the rain god, the populace solemnised the marriage of a jenny and a jackass. It rained cats and dogs all night!


10^{36} (PHYSICAL ATOMS)
$+10^{21}$ (ATMAS)
GT

ISKON
(International Society for Krishna Consciousness)
Mimics Christian Propagandists

March 1983

[Author's preface: Following the example of Maharishi Mahesh, all the Indian godmen with a vast following abroad now bring in westerners with high-sounding scientific degrees from well-known universities. These people write erudite pieces in the English press and make it seem as though the ancient Hindus knew all along, before anyone else ever did, what modern science is now discovering to its "astonishment." Nothing flatters the racially minded Indian more than to see these white witless morons flat on their faces at the feet of gurus and godmen. Prabhupad simply "had to be right" if even Einstein, quoted out of context, "supports" his view. Perhaps Eccles, Wigner, and Wald might be surprised to know that they are making a valuable contribution to the idea of *atmagyan* (the "science" of the soul), simply by letting their doubt show.]

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, ISKON, that money-spinning religious multinational corporation thought up by his "divine grace," the late A. C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupad, "incarnation" of the Hindu god Krishna, has a flourishing center in Bombay. The research and education wing is the Bhaktivedanta Institute, whose director is the 45-year-old Bhaktisvarup Damodar Swami. In an interview for a Bombay weekly, he explained the institute's purpose to propagate *atmagyan*, or the science of the soul.

Bhaktisvarup hails from Manipur in northeast India and, after passing his M.Tech. from Calcutta University, went on to an M.S. in Chemistry from Canisius College, Buffalo. In 1974 he was awarded a Ph.D. in

Physical Organic Chemistry from the University of California. Later he became a Research Fellow at Emory College, Atlanta. With such an impressive string of qualifications, it was "inevitable" that he should devote all his experience to the "science" of religion! The Institute was founded with the "divine" purpose of presenting ancient Vedic Hinduism to a world of modern scientific technology, since scientific-sounding explanations for religious phenomena are more compellingly attractive in convincing the younger generation of today, according to Bhaktisvarup Damodar.

How was the idea first conceived? Back in 1970, when director Bhaktisvarup Damodar was working for his doctorate, he met the ISKON founder, A.C. Prabhupad, and sometimes went on morning walks with him in Los Angeles.

A prominent evolutionist, Stanley Miller, held a seminar called "The Origin of Life," which the young man also attended. "He was talking of life as a chemical principle," said Bhaktisvarup Damodar.

> There is no god, no creation — everything comes about by random chemical combinations. In other words, maybe you are familiar with Darwinian evolution? It is completely a material concept of life; doesn't have any spiritual meaning. . . .

This "heresy" so outraged the young scholar that during the question and answer session he bluntly accosted the prominent evolutionist and demanded to know why humans with all their know-how had not yet been able to assemble even the smallest life system in the lab. If they can synthesize amino acids, DNAs, RNAs, protein molecules, lipids, and other biochemicals, can they not produce the smallest organism?

This profound question "flummoxed" the eminent evolutionist, who sheepishly answered, "Well, I don't know whether it's possible or not."

These scientific "heresies" were duly reported by the earnest young man to his mentor, Prabhupad, on their morning walk. And, said he, "his divine grace was extremely angry that modern scientists should talk thus in the name of scientific knowledge.

> It was very harmful for propagating proper knowledge to the younger generation. Because in a way you are simply teaching them how to be materialist, how to be Atheist; you are simply teaching them there is no creation, or there is no design in cosmic manifestation. So anyway it was against the principles of religiosity, this complete commitment to material understanding.

> He (A.C. Prabhupad) talked very seriously about our modern civilization's breakdown of moral and ethical principles, especially in Western society like the United States. The coming of the hippie movement, the degradation of the quality of life, are due to this sort of teaching in the colleges and universities. He felt there was a genuine necessity of projecting spiritual knowledge, or about the science of the self, the science of the soul called *atmagyan*.

This plum job fell to Bhaktisvarup Damodar, who as a highly trained scientist could spread *atmagyan* through the medium of "modern scientific terminology"; however, while he took every opportunity to toss into the interview as much terminology as possible, the actual science of the soul was left exactly where he found it — up in the air.

What is the Bhaktisvarup's grouse against modern science?

"It doesn't teach us self-reliance — only about atoms and molecules. And when those atoms and molecules finish, we also finish." In other words, it ignores the "spiritual" existence. Scientists study life "superficially," from outside, and ignore the "spiritual spark of the spiritual atom" inside.

This "stupid" refusal on the part of modern science to discern the non-visible through the microscope, and believe in the nonexistent in the laboratory, is its greatest "defect." Otherwise, we would not need Bhaktivedanta institutes! The director was prepared to concede, however, that scientists are "doing a great job. There is nothing wrong with science. It is a special genius. But all this could be much more meaningful if they realized that life has a spiritual element."

At which point does scientific religious research on the soul really start?

At zero actually, because according to Bhaktisvarup, "We first agree that there is a nonphysical entity. This nonphysical entity is called life. It is nonphysical and nonchemical, but it interacts with the material and chemical elements."

On this "unshakable, unverifiable, no-nonsense" foundation rests the entire scientific edifice of *atmagyan*. You simply cannot go wrong once you acquire the genuine understanding that life is a nonphysical phenomenon and the spiritual atom or the *atma* is quite distinct from the material or physical atom.

In all this woolly pontification, nowhere did the Bhaktisvarup reveal exactly what laboratory tests were expected to prove the science of the soul's existence. But evidently it takes a particular kind of scientist.

"Only that individual who understands the physical molecule of life as well as the spiritual molecule can see how one complements the other, how knowledge and material phenomena interact." He then proceeded to explain how even enzymes display a certain intelligence.

> Say, when you take a protein molecule. In each stage certain types of special enzymes are required. These enzymes have to be there at the right time and at the right place; they can never be replaced by anything else. But there are innumerable enzymes. How does that selection take place at that particular time and place and everything in perfect order, perfect systematic organization? By seeing that, you can come to the sensible conclusion that there is an intelligence even in the molecular level. What I mean is that there is some intelligent system that organizes and directs even in the cellular platform or molecular and submolecular level.

Director Bhaktisvarup Damodar says he finds himself in excellent company. "About the beginning of this year," said he,

> you may have seen, there was an article by Hoyle, the British astronomer, and Bikram Singe, the Sri Lankan who is also working in the U.K. By their calculations, although they say they do not believe in the existence of god, but by their mathematical calculations there must be a god. They are publishing this in popular science magazines and journals.

But how can a totally nonmaterial, nonexistent, nonvisible entity like the "soul" be set out in a mathematical calculation? "The thing is we do not need mathematics," replied the Bhaktisvarup.

> We try to understand what life is. Modern science does not give the answer. So there must be some spiritual science. This does not have to be understood in terms of mathematics. So although we use modern techniques, it is not completely a vital element which we must use. It is because we have to communicate that we have to speak a similar language.

In short, the scientific bit is just a front to sugar-coat the same old pill. But Bhaktisvarup is confident he is working in collaboration with the best scientific brains of the century. "I want to show you this journal,

Science Digest," he said, "You know about it? Published from the U.S.? I have the July issue with me. There is an article called "Scientists Searching For The Soul." It's about brilliant scientists, all Nobel-laureates, like John Eccles, Eugene Wigner, the quantum physicist. All these scientists are saying that yes, there is a nonphysical soul within this body. Like George Wald, he was our guest here in Bombay last year. I met him three or four years ago in Rome, and he was talking just like an ordinary scientist saying everything is material. But now he's changing his view. He is saying there is a nonphysical consciousness which is the essence of life. Now there are many brilliant scientists who think the same. Even the Nobel-laureate who discovered vitamin C, Szent-Gyorgi. He's still alive, in the U.S. He says after so many years — he is old, must be ninety or between eighty-five and ninety. And he says "In my search for the secret of life, I ended up with atoms and electrons which have no life at all. Somewhere along the line, life has run out through my fingers."

All of this, of course, goes to "prove" that Hinduism is true!

Will life (*i.e.*, money) also run out from between ISKON's fingers? Probably not with the kind of "scientific" mind Bhaktisvarup Damodar Swami brings to his job as director of the Bhaktivedanta Institute for making religious claptrap more meaningful in scientific terms.

Science Daily. July 1982.

Handmaidens of God

April 1983

A survey of the prostitutes in the red light areas of the cities of Bombay and Poona reveal that 30 percent in Bombay and more than 50 percent in Poona are there in fulfillment of a religious vow. Drawn from the untouchable class, three-fourths of them were initiated into the profession before they were fourteen. These women are called *devadasis* and are dedicated to the goddess Yellamma. Even though their degradation is no less extreme than that of their sisters, they are scornful of the common or garden variety of tart, and resent being called prostitutes.

Deva means god, and *dasi*, female slave or votary. They are daughters of Yellamma or Yellardamma (Mother of All), probably an ancient fertility goddess. Temple prostitution now survives only in pockets in some parts of India, but the *devadasi* cult is still widespread along the western coastal districts of Maharastra state, in Goa, and in the southern state of Karnataka.

In October last year the Karnataka government passed a law imposing a three-year sentence and a fine on anyone initiating little girls as *devadasis*. But the Bombay Devadasi Act has been on the statute books since 1934 without any effect. It is unlikely that this newest law will intimidate people in a society where religious tradition dictates that giving daughters to Yellamma will earn her blessings.

The Yellamma legend is somewhat bizarre and differs from district to district. Renuka was the pious wife of a sage called Jamdagni, so chaste that she could carry water for his rituals in a pitcher of sand resting on a coiled serpent on her head. But one day she saw a number of handsome

celestial spirits sporting in the river and lusted after them. Her pitcher of sand dissolved and her enraged husband commanded her sons to slay her for her immorality. Parsuram, the youngest, agreed to behead her after making his father grant him three boons. One of these was that Jamdagni should restore Renuka to life. The chauvinistic sage agreed and had the boy fix the head of an untouchable caste woman to Renuka's shoulders. In addition, he cursed her by declaring that only unmarried women would serve her by begging in her name on Tuesdays and Fridays and yielding to any man who desired them even if he was a leper, since they would see in him the image of her son, Parsuram. Today, in a grafting of Aryan and Dravidian tradition, Renuka-Yellamma is the patroness of girls chosen in accordance with the sage's curse. But in some places they are dedicated to other gods like the elephant-headed Ganesa, the monkey-headed Hanuman (a celibate god), and even to Jamdagni and Parsuram themselves. Sometimes very young boys are also initiated and thereafter forced to live dressed in women's clothes, wearing their hair long and adorned with ornaments and bangles.

How does a family know that the "Divine Mother" has chosen their daughter to serve her? Through signs and portents, the most common being the appearance of a tangle of hair on a child's head, called a *jat*. This is obviously the result of dirty habits and irregular combing. But the family does not comb it out. Instead, they thicken the tangle with grease and let it grow long. In some rural areas, *devadasi* women are recognizable by their *jats*, thick coils descending to their knees in a few cases. These are so heavy and matted that they must be carried in a cloth bag. The women cannot sleep on their backs and complain of constant headaches.

Another method is to be named by an older *devadasi* who is promised salvation if she ties the marriage necklace onto another initiate. These old whores travel out from the city accompanied by brothel-keepers, looking for attractive young girls. Or they might come alone to recruit a number to set up their own establishments and live on the girls' earnings. They usually know which families in the village have girls with *jats* and go into a trance before naming them as chosen by Yellamma to serve her. Upper-caste rich men with their eye on attractive victims bribe the old *devadasi* to name particular ones. No family dares to disregard the Mother's wishes for fear she will destroy them in her wrath.

Because of extreme poverty, however, voluntary initiation is also common in families, with relatives making a *jat* appear on a child's head

by rubbing a lock of her hair with turmeric water and thickening it with oil. As a *devadasi* she will never marry, but stand as a son to the family members, maintaining them with her earnings, inheriting the family property, and giving her own name to any children she produces from her many liaisons. In a sense she achieves some of what women's liberation would applaud, but at the cost of her total right to personhood, which women's liberation would deplore. As compensation for her loss of status, she is regarded by village folk as an auspicious person to have around at religious functions even in high-caste homes.

Dedication of girls is on the increase and takes place at village shrines, places of pilgrimage for prostitutes, or at home. The ceremony might be held on one of the four full moons in a year sacred to them. In one famous township in Karnataka, initiates dressed scantily in leaves bathe with men in a sacred pond and then go in procession to the temple. Looking over the girls are older *devadasis* and brothel-keepers from Bombay who are aided in their job by the forty high-caste priests who conduct the ceremony.

In return for a fat fee, the priests in turn bring pressure on families to secure their daughters. They tell of dreams in which some dead relative has expressed a wish that a particular girl should be dedicated, or they lend money to needy families and persuade the girls to go to the city with their friends. Once there, they are sold to brothels.

The dedication ceremony is much like a Hindu wedding, but with a sword representing the bridegroom. The girl serves food to other *devadasis* in their begging bowls, bathes and anoints herself, and dresses in new clothes before proceeding to the temple. Here, for a fee, the priest conducts the worship of the goddess and ties the marriage necklace round her neck, consisting of five beads which look like pearls. The others then throw rice at her. Rich men pay well for the privilege of deflowering her.

Thereafter, she might find a rich patron to keep her. But few are so fortunate and work as laborers in field and factory while plying their trade at night for three or four rupees per client. Those who migrate to larger towns and cities like Bombay never return, but are sold and resold by operators until they grow too old and diseased to be of any worth.

The girls' own attitude towards Yellamma is strangely ambivalent. Some are proud that she has chosen them, others are fearful that if they refuse she will bring misfortune on their families. But all agree that their lot is a miserable one, and they would not wish their children to go into

it. What few stop to ask is why Yellamma chooses only poor untouchable girls and not high-caste rich girls.

The religious front to this degrading cult has been devised by higher caste Hindus to give them free access to the girls from the despised untouchables without running the risk of losing caste. In addition, they hold the superstitious and poverty stricken in thrall through an archaic myth which helps them exploit *devadasis* for purposes of prostitution.

Legislation of the most enlightened kind seldom filters down to those sections of Indian society for which they are specifically meant because of illiteracy and the lack of will to see them implemented. There are laws against child marriage, untouchability, dowry, and other social evils, but they are rarely invoked. Unless the untouchables themselves undertake an intensive campaign in these particular districts to make families aware of the exploitation of their girls, it is unlikely that Yellamma will give up her hold on her many victims.

Keep The Home Fires Burning!

May 1983

If there is one thing which astonishes Indians it is the utter gullibility of the average American who gets caught up in the "mysticism of the East." For those of us who are acutely aware of the strong element of fraud in Indian godmen and gurus, it is difficult to understand what it is that their western disciples seek. How is it that so many are so convincingly conned into swallowing all that nonsense? What makes them think that any rubbish coming out of India has to be special because it is antiquated, benighted, incomprehensible, and downright irrational? In the final analysis I suppose the "religious mentality" is the same wherever it is found.

The following news item appeared in an Indian newspaper early in February. It is this kind of story which delights the more pious among Indians. It "proves" there's nothing modern science teaches which wasn't already known to the ancient Aryans a couple of thousand years ago. It read:

> *Agnihotra*, the ancient Indian practice of worship by burning specific substances in fire, is now being practiced in many countries as "homatherapy" to cure disease, relieve mental stress, control pollution and increase farm yield.
>
> According to Mr. Barry Rathner, an American psychologist who is conducting research on the effect of *agnihotra* in reducing mind tension in the department of experimental psychology at the University of Pune (Poona), homatherapy can cure epilepsy in children and improve the IQ of mentally retarded ones.

How was this feat achieved? By exposing a group of affected children to a strong whiff of burning cow dung chips, pure *ghee* (clarified butter), and rice placed in a copper pyramid to the accompaniment of particular *mantras* (magical formulas or chants) at sunset and sunrise!

According to Barry Rathner, psychologist, three epileptic children were cured after four months, and the IQ of the retarded ones was found to have increased. Interestingly, their appetites allegedly became normal and they gave up smoking!

Rathner's "erudition" is impressive. *Agnihotra*, the Vedic "science" of *yajna* (fire sacrifice), says he, "is based on the fact the mind is affected by the biorhythms of nature corresponding to the undulations of the earth. Various rhythms of nature corresponding to the rotation of the earth and other cosmic objects affect the human mind and body. Burning specific substances in fire and uttering particular mantras under the conditions of certain rhythms of nature produce specific effects in the atmosphere."

In short, smoke in collaboration with the earth's rotation and undulation, biorhythms and sound vibration (from the mantras) allegedly can increase the IQ of even the most retarded.

The ritual needs a semi-pyramid-shaped copper pot and firewood from trees, but not those with thorns or bitter fruit. Cow dung chips, pure *ghee* and uncooked rice grains are tossed into the fire with suitable mantras. Sunrise and sunset require different mantras.

Rathner claims that Dr. Arvind D. Mondkar, a microbiologist experimenting on the effects of *agnihotra* on bacteria, found a reduction in the microbe count by 91.4 percent in the room. So the fire ritual is supposed to be a fumigant and a disinfectant as well! It should be mentioned that Indian peasants burn cow dung chips in their homes for cooking fuel, but they die of pestilence and disease nonetheless. Mondkar claims nevertheless that "*agnihotra* fumes are rich in formaldehyde and other substances which have an inhibitory effect on micro-organisms." He makes this claim in a magazine published from Virginia, U.S.A.

In agriculture the alleged effects of *agnihotra* are "astonishing." Grape-growers around Poona "found" that seeds germinated in twenty-one days instead of the usual six months. Rathner claims that a German company has prepared a pesticide from *agnihotra* against disease in mustard plants. Pharmaceuticals being produced in West Germany are "effective" against colds, headaches, skin fungus, non-healing wounds, herpes, hay fever, migraine, whitlow, tonsilitis and diarrhea.

All of this, mind you, out of bottles containing only fumes!

Agnihotra is very popular in America, says Rathner. In fact, a nonstop ritual has been going on round-the-clock at the "Agnihotra Press" farm in Baltimore, Maryland, since September 4, 1978.

But the fact that Rathner and his friends from Maryland have evidently failed to inhale any common sense into their heads through their lungs makes me suspect that there are indeed some tenacious cases of moronism which *agnihotra* fumes simply cannot cure.

Selective Abortion

June 1983

India's 1981 census figures showed that the existing gap between males and females had widened still more. It is likely that the male-female ratio will continue to be weighted in favour of males out-numbering females. This imbalance is due to a number of interesting factors.

Whereas most countries, even with a reasonable standard of health, have a higher mortality rate among boy babies than girl babies, in India this is reversed because of social and religious bias against girl babies. Formerly female infanticide was practiced by exposing girls at birth in the open, or by applying poison to the nursing mother's nipples. But though this is no longer done, the prejudice against girls is still deeply rooted. They are a liability to raise to adulthood and thereafter a financial burden to marry off. In rural areas particularly, when girls fall sick, there is often deliberate neglect in getting them treated.

Boys are reared more carefully. They are an asset to their parents, likely to bring riches by way of dowry when they marry and, for pious Hindus, a guarantee of salvation when they are present to light the parental funeral pyre and carry out all the meticulous rituals prescribed. Girls are barred from this kind of participation in funeral rites.

Mrs. Tara Ali Beg, a prominent social worker and writer for children, with twenty-five years of experience in the cause of destitute children, and now president of the S.O.S. Children's Villages of India, is one of the most outspoken critics of traditional Indian attitudes towards girls. In an article carried by a weekly magazine, she tells of the case of a man who brought a lovely three year old girl to the Delhi S.O.S. Foundling

Home for admission. When asked whose child she was, he replied, "She is ours. My wife and I had three girls; and now that we have had a son, we want to *dispose of* the third daughter."

When applying for adoption, says Mrs. Beg, Indian families invariably want boys who must also be fair in complexion. Children are well-loved where they are found within stable family conditions, but there is no doubt that religious tradition reflects considerable prejudice against daughters. In many middle-class homes educational and professional facilities are more readily given to the sons since the daughters will inevitably marry. In Hindu society marriage is a social obligation and a pious duty placed upon parents. Dowry has been declared illegal, so in place of cash the bridegroom's family demand "gifts" in the form of cars, scooters, refrigerators, TV sets, and other luxuries which are regarded as status symbols. In the Punjab, in the first year of a daughter's marriage, her parents must give their son-in-law more gifts during important festivals. And a second round of gift giving is called for when she has her first child.

Not surprisingly, parents prefer not to have daughters. Rituals for securing male issue are various and many, involving piety, penance, and pledges to the gods. Herbal medicines are swallowed in the belief that they will influence the unborn child's gender. Often, parents promise to pledge a son to the service of a particular god or goddess. The tombs and shrines of famous saints who have become associated with female fertility are visited to make offerings, tie a red thread, or leave some other token of their prayer. In Bombay the Roman Catholic shrine of Mary of the Mount is visited by people of all religions in search of miraculous cures or for the reward of issue. Astrologers and palmists are consulted, and horoscopes are scanned — all in the expectation that the unborn child will be a boy.

Girls are seen as a financial burden because of the conventions of dowry and extravagance at the time of marriage. Even banks advertising savings programs to clients offer special schemes for putting away enough for the day a daughter is married. A middle-class parent needs to be prepared to pay anything up to 50,000 rupees ($4,000) in dowry and spend another 100,000 rupees ($8,000) on jewelry, clothes, and the marriage itself. In rural areas villagers who have no savings fall into debt. Once a daughter is married off to a "good" husband, most parents feel an intolerable burden has been lifted from their shoulders. But a man saddled with four or five daughters might find himself quite ruined.

Even after a girl is married off and in her turn produces nothing but girls, she is likely to incur the wrath of her in-laws.

These are some of the factors which reinforce the bias against daughters in every religious community. And it is this bias which is reflected in the use of sex determination tests of the unborn child being used to justify "selective" abortions of female fetuses.

Initially, these tests were introduced into government hospitals to check sex-linked disorders, neural defects, and congenital deformities. But high officials and politicians began using the facility in government clinics for selective abortions. In an effort to stop the practice, in 1977 the government banned these tests for any other than fetal abnormalities. This drove them underground and into private practitioners' clinics.

According to the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act of 1971, abortion is legal in India for a twenty- to twenty-four-week old fetus. Since sex can be determined by fourteen to sixteen weeks, there is still a safety margin of four weeks. But unethical practitioners often perform abortions even after twenty-four weeks if the tests confirm that the woman is carrying a female fetus.

The first clinic to come out into the open is also one of the first of its kind and located in Amritsar in the Punjab. It is owned by a Sikh doctor and his gynecologist wife. "If abortion is acceptable," they argue, "what is wrong with selective abortion?"

Clinics are now found in all major Indian cities for those who can afford the fees. A prominent weekly magazine published a report last year on the kind of patients admitted to the Amritsar clinic. Their case histories are revealing. The wife of a forest contractor was in for her fifth pregnancy. After having four girls she had been advised that another birth might prove fatal to her. But she said she was prepared to take the risk if clinical tests confirmed the fetus was a male. (In India, as in the rest of the world, women are their own worst enemies!)

A businessman, already father of four young daughters, was jubilant because the test had proved his pregnant wife now carried a son. A staff nurse from a family planning unit had just had an abortion done because she already had three girls, and the test confirmed she was carrying a fourth. She was determined not to have a fourth child, she said, until she was sure it was a son.

A twenty-seven-year old jeweller whose wife was admitted for tests told the reporter, "Even though we are well-to-do, for marrying my third sister we had to knock at two thousand doors before we found a good husband for her. It's humiliating. That is why my wife and I have decided that if our second child is also going to be a girl, we'd much rather have the pregnancy terminated."

The president of the Indian Medical Association, commenting on the increasing number of selective abortions now being done, said, "There is not a single instance where the expectant mother has decided not to have the abortion once she is told the unborn child is a girl."

Because of unhygienic conditions and medical malpractice bringing on serious complications after the test, many wealthier families prefer to go to clinics in Bombay. One prominent gynecologist of a private clinic in the city admitted to the reporter of a national daily that he had performed at least 6,000 amniocentesis tests. "From beggars to top executives there is no limit to the craze. I get an average of eight to ten cases a day."

When the whole sordid story broke in the national press last year, there was somewhat hysterical reaction from social workers, women's organizations, and in parliament. But that was all. Doctors themselves are divided about the ethics of the procedure. Many clearly support selective abortion as a good means of birth control, since a couple always decide to stop after they get the son they want.

Dr. D.N. Pai, Director of Family Planning, says that tests should be allowed on "merit" after a woman has had only daughters. When asked whether such action does not reinforce prevailing prejudices against female children, he replied, "The desire for a male child nurtured for centuries cannot die. A country with a population problem like ours needs sex-determination tests. All this talk of imbalance in the male-female ratio is simply feminist propaganda."

Another doctor sees the tests as a means of preventing the birth of yet another unwanted girl baby in a society where she is likely to end up victim of severe social and psychological pressures through no fault of her own. He has a point there, for there is little hope for her in a tradition which sees her as a kind of subspecies.

But demographers take a grave view of the widening gap. A diminishing number of marriageable girls will further reduce their status and lead to greater social and economic victimization.

To America, with Love

July 1983

Indians might be disappointed that the American immigration department hasn't taken too kindly to our special gift to the United States — Bhagwan Rajneesh. The debate about whether or not he is a genuine teacher of religion appears rather like looking a gift horse in the mouth. We assure you his credentials are impeccable. He claims to love capitalism and firmly believes in science, technology, and materialism. He sees Communism and the U.S.S.R. as satanic and supports "the freedom to be unequal." Not for him the narrow life-negating philosophy of conventional Hinduism; he practices what he preaches. And where other uptight godmen teach tantrism to achieve a spiritual "high," he uses it to induce the beatific orgasm.

Why has he chosen the United States to establish his kingdom? Because, he says, "it is the most open-minded and democratic country in the world which guarantees freedom from religious persecution and has a proud tradition of tolerance and acceptance."

Though he declared once that California and not the Himalayas is the world's most spiritual center, he has had to settle instead for Big Muddy Ranch near Antelope, Oregon, to transform into a "paradise on earth." He paid a cool $6,000,000 dollars for this run-down property and, in anticipation of a long stay, has renamed it Rajneeshpuram, or City of Rajneesh.

We are surprised that American officialdom should quibble about him not being a religious teacher simply because he hasn't spoken a word for so long. In the Indian tradition of sagedom immense wisdom is ascribed to the senile and to the dumb. In fact, for $2.50 you can buy

The Rajneesh Nothing Book. It consists of 200 blank pages.

In any case, how much can a god really say for himself? According to counts lovingly made by his devotees, the master has already spewed 33 million words at the rate of 13,000 a day for 7 days a week, 52 weeks in a year, in addition to answering more than 20,000 questions. Judging from the prices of his published works and tapes of his discourses, every word is worth its weight in gold, smutty jokes and all.

What is the essence of his teaching?

On sex? "For me going into sex for reproductive reasons is sinful because it is animal, it is unconscious, and it is biological." (Compulsory sterilization is one of the more closely guarded secrets of his cult.) When you are free of your nasty animal proclivity to breed, then you can attain "superconsciousness" from the sexual experience. Then, says he, "you are rising higher than biology; you are going above the animals; you are reaching the peaks of humanity."

On love? "Prayer groping towards God." (Good groping, friends!)

On family? "The most outdated thing. It has done its work. It is no longer needed. In fact, it is the most hindering phenomenon for human progress."

On wealth and money? "I am not against money; I am against money-mindedness. I am not against possessions; I am against possessiveness." Neatly put, especially with this stipulation — applied primarily to himself rather than his followers: "There is no need to renounce money. Without money life will become very dumb."

Borrowing heavily from Western cult concepts, the Bhagwan's ashram in Poona became the Indian equivalent of a California Esalen Institute with a variety of therapies offered to induce states of "expanded consciousness."

As an experience industry, the Rajneesh cult is a multi-million-dollar business with 220 centers in India and 250 around the world along with 80,000 initiated *sanyasins* or disciples. The Rajneesh Foundation is one of the richest in the godman line of goods, and it is managed by two astute Indian women from Gujarat.

Being a religious foundation, it went untaxed until Morarji Desai became prime minister. It is rumored that he withdrew this exemption leaving the "enlightened master" in tax arrears to the tune of two million rupees ($200,000 U.S.) and subsequently forcing him to leave the country. Rajneesh and Desai clashed often in the popular press. The godman denounced Desai as a pious piss-drinking hypocrite while Desai, seeing Rajneesh as a blot on Hinduism's "fair name," wanted him and his orange-robed devotees out.

If the Indian middle class strongly disapproved of the ashram's permissiveness, it also found the whole scene highly intriguing. Historically, Poona has a long unbroken tradition of Brahmin orthodoxy. The goings-on in the six-acre playground offered everyone plenty of scope for dirty-minded speculation. Residents accused the ashramites of corrupting the Hindu way of life by behaving improperly in public "hugging, kissing and holding hands in the street."

There were serious and violent incidents, some of which plainly indicated that a certain criminal element is present in the cult. The hostility of the people quite spoilt the sunshine and happiness the master dispensed. Efforts were made to secure land outside Poona, in Gujarat, and in the Himalayas, but without success. Finally, in June of 1981, the Bhagwan, seventeen close disciples, and his Rolls-Royce cars were quietly spirited away on a PanAm flight from Bombay. For months thereafter nobody knew where he had gone.

Rajneesh Chandra Mohan comes from Jain parentage and was born in 1931 in a small town in central India. He is a self-proclaimed god since he never took initiation from any guru. This has allowed him ample scope for exercising his divine instinct. "I am not part of any tradition," he says. "I am the beginning of a tradition."

Sanyas, according to Hinduism, means abandoning the world and its pleasures, but Rajneesh offers neo-*sanyas*, self-centered hedonism. The postmark on letters from the Poona ashram was "Let's go!" Every devotee who is accepted as a *sanyasin* (after contributions) is given a Hindu name, a 108-bead necklace with a medallion of the master, and an orange robe. He chose orange because it stands for sun, fire, and life. It also allegedly gives off positive "life-affirming vibrations."

"I am the Truth, I am the Door, I am the Gate. Come to me, pass through me," declares Rajneesh using the kind of patter which probably rings familiar echoes in the minds of his many Western devotees with their Christian roots.

But to be able to get anywhere close to "the Truth, the Door, and the Gate," let alone pass through, a seeker must first pass the "sniff test." This messiah is allergic to strong smells. They activate his asthma. In the Poona ashram two *sanyasins* gave every visitor a good sniff-over before admission to the Buddha hall where he held audience. From Chanel to honest sweat, the entire range of smells was taboo.

His closest companion is the reincarnation of his former girlfriend, Sushma Sharma, who died in 1947. She is now called Ma Yoga Vivek. "Just before I died," she says, "I made him promise that he would call me back, that wherever I was he would call me back." He "kept his

promise" and "called her back" all the way from England where she'd been reborn as an Englishwoman.

Of this wispy and almost unknown *Sanyasin* the "enlightened master" says,

> Vivek is so close to me that she is constantly on the cross. And I go on creating many situations. I have to create them because only through friction does integration happen. Only through harder and harder situations does one grow. Growth is not soft. It is painful. Many people say, 'what do you do with Vivek?' I am killing her slowly. That is the only way for her to be a totally new being, to be reborn.

Male chauvinism and ambiguity have always typified the gods.

Ma Yoga Vivek's job is "to care for the master's body." While at Poona she also drove him in his million-rupee Mercedes from his cloistered room to the Buddha hall every day — a distance of 100 yards.

Packaged spiritual therapies offered by the cult include vague dance forms like the *nataraj* meditation and the *sufi* dance which is much like an American square dance. The Rajneesh International No-University offers neoacupressure massage, Rajneesh breath therapy, and Rajneesh *tao*, the cheapest in the range.

Gita Mehta in her book *Karma Cola* presents an amusing yet perceptive exposé of the commercialization of Hindu spirituality. When she visited the ashram, the Indian matriarch in charge explained how important it is to discover the roots of one's energies and understand one's urges and drives.

> So we are telling those who come to us, "do not be afraid. Go toward your anger." After all, if a man is obsessed with violence, how will he have time for more important things? We have meditations in the ashram where the disciples beat each other. *Hai Ram*, what simple pleasure they get from hitting and thrashing. I tell you only yesterday one boy had his wrist smashed, but he is happy and it is very beautiful.

Groups of eight, locked into leather-padded rooms, were armed with two-foot-long wooden *coshes* with rubber padding wrapped in green cloth. Green, Ms. Mehta points out, is the Indian colour for peace. The meditation lasted one hour with participants in a state of "spiritual excitation."

The ashram had a flourishing printing press churning out brochures, books, and pamphlets, on the "master." The public relations was handled by a former Canadian renamed Krishna Prem.

> What is happening now is similar to what happened under the Bodhi tree in Gaya 2,500 years ago, or on the shores of Galilee nearly 2,000 years back. The trouble is it's happening in such godless times. That's why we need a Press Office.

The department is now probably working overtime to create public opinion on behalf of the Bhagwan. In February, a group of orange-robed *sanyasins* demonstrated outside the United States Embassy in Delhi against his possible deportaion. The truth is that if America rejects him, India doesn't want him back.

Maybe Guyana will take him.

The Rajneesh Nothing Book. Issued by the press at the Pune ashram.

*O'Hair, Madalyn. "Islam vs. Progress — Iran's Dilemma." In the *American Atheist*, edited by Madalyn O'Hair, January 1979, vol. 21, pp. 8-9. Austin, Tx: American Atheist Press.

Two Equals One and One Equals None

September 1983

In Pakistan, according to an Islamic law being considered by the federal advisory council appointed to advise the government on scriptural legal interpretation, the testimony of two women will be required to equal that of one man in any dispute, while the evidence of one woman alone will be given no credence at all. This will effectively reduce female credibility to half that of the male!

In February, on what one conservative newspaper described a "Lahore's Day of Infamy," a group of women concerned about the steady erosion of their rights took out a procession against the law. They were severely beaten with batons and tear-gassed by their Islamic sisters in police uniform. While the policewomen were highly commended for their action, only one woman member of the federal advisory council spoke out against it, calling it "an unparalleled and shameful incident — you don't beat even donkeys like that."

Orthodox opinion burst out with *burqa*-clad women calling a press conference and threatening to come out into the streets, too. They were supported by male religious students who staged a noisy demonstration and warned they would not tolerate such female protest in their city.

As reported in the *American Atheist** in January 1979, the Islamicization of our neighbor Pakistan continues apace. President Zia has vowed he will remain in office only until he has completed this sacred task. But restoring his country to the pristine purity of the sixth century has meant reintroducing such simplistic expedients for curing thieves of thievery as chopping off their hands, saving fornicators from them-

selves by stoning them, and lashing people publicly for minor indiscretions like tippling.

The general made no statement on the women's demonstration. But his Minister of State for Health and Social Welfare, Mrs. Afifa Mamdot, chaired a rival group of women which contemptuously described the UN Charter on women's rights as an "anti-Islamic" document. The feminists were condemned as "westernized" females who deserved punishment for treason. A male member of the legislative assembly was applauded when he remarked that the women were in fact opposed to Islam.

The protest was supported by many lawyers and some of the country's top retired judges, however. The Women's Action Forum representing a number of groups declares that the Koran does not bar a single woman from giving evidence, nor does it nullify her testimony. The only verse that specifically mentions the evidence of one man and two women relates to business transactions. Even here men and women are equal with the role of corroborator assigned to the second woman in support of the primary female witness.

The most intriguing development in the dispute is the emergence of eight American Muslims who demand punishment for the "traitors" of Islam. Describing themselves as *ulemas* and *muftis* (religious teachers), they claim to be doing research on Islamic jurisprudence at a religious school in Lahore, Pakistan. Lahore, Pakistan, they say, is the citadel of Islam, Pakistan's President a lieutenant of Allah on earth and Pakistan's armed forces an arm of the almighty Allah.

Enraged Pakistani *ulemas* on their part have gone further and threatened to issue a *fatwa*, or religious decree, pronouncing the protesting women apostates and beyond the Islamic pale. Apostasy draws stringent punishment — the chief being a dissolution of their marriages. Unmarried ones among them will remain spinsters perforce since no pious muslim can marry a *kafira* (female apostate).

To confound the situation further the country's top Islamic court, the federal *shariat* court, recently ruled in favor of women being appointed as *qazis* (judges and magistrates), since there is no prohibition in Islam on this score. But if the law of evidence is adopted, then we must presume that women judges and magistrates are only half as reliable as their male counterparts!

The public debate continues. Meanwhile, the *ulemas* have urged the erring women to repent and entreat Allah's forgiveness — *not* directly but through their pious parents and relatives!

Tantra — The Four Letter Way to Enlightenment

October 1983

In the introduction to *The Perfumed Garden*, translated by the nineteenth century scholar and adventurer, Richard Burton, who also gave the West the *Kama Sutra*, Alan Hull Walton says that "for the Oriental, orgasm symbolized the ecstasy of the soul possessed by, or in union with, god, even though it remained imprisoned within the confines of the flesh."

It is interesting to speculate just how this notion got around that Oriental coitus is more religious in content than the Occidental sort. Indians themselves are prepared to believe it. I recall reading a letter to the editor of *The Times of India* condemning the permissive sexuality of the West and glorifying in the fact that we Indians have learnt to sublimate sex and turn it to higher purposes. Probably the writer saw our population explosion as a manifestly religious phenomenon — fervent spirituality running riot, no doubt.

As it happens there are very pious Indians who practice tantra and observe strict celibacy together. And there are others who combine tantra with ritualized orgy-type sex. Historically there were three kinds of tantra. One probably disappeared in the late nineteenth century since it involved the use of human skulls and rigorous austerities performed while perched on the corpse of a man sacrificed for the ritual. The second sort of tantra is openly practiced, involving as Nirad Chaudhuri says, "a course of esoteric self-mortification and gymnastics based on the most absurd physiological and psychological notions."

The third form, which is enjoying a boom in the West, takes these same notions and makes tantra into a cult of ecstasy to achieve a

four-letter spiritual high. Godman Rajneesh has latched onto this one, filled it out with bits and pieces from Western cult notions, and turned out a full-blooded mix of hedonistic nonsense to guarantee the achievement of "super-consciousness."

Dropouts and hippies attached themselves to Indian godmen to give their drug experience meaning and significance. Sexual permissiveness finds tantra an easy pathway to god. Hinduism is gentler on the conscience than Christianity.

As a cult of ecstasy the origins of tantra are obscure. It could be a carryover from ancient fertility rites. Thereafter it has probably persisted as a surreptitious protest against Brahmanical stringency on sex. Turning Hindu celibacy inside out, it uses sex as a means of achieving spiritual bliss. The orgasm is a "divine" ecstasy which raises the participants to "transcendental states of consciousness." A cosmic bang!

Women get a look in on this scene since they symbolize the female principle in creation. They are first worshipped and then become partners in ritual coitus. This form of tantra also rejects Hindu concepts of purity. Tantriks indulge in taboo foods and liquor during the ceremony. Five *m*'s are allowed as gratification in worship — *madya* (alcohol), *mamsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (grain), and *maithun* (coitus).

Erotic tantrism was widely practiced by Tibetan Buddhists and in Nepal, Bengal, and Assam. Orthodoxy drove it underground, but Western interest in it has now brought it out into the open.

Tantra assumes the existence of an inner or "subtle" body within the physical one. Meditation is centered on esoteric diagrams symbolizing male-female concepts. The meditator first visualizes the cosmos, then the earth and planets, imagining his spine is the central axis on which all turns. He then focuses on a string of *chakras*, or wheels shaped like lotuses in his subtle body. The first *chakra* is at the base of the pelvis behind the genitals. Here there lies coiled a familiar friend from another fairy tale — a serpent. *Kundalini* sleeps a lot, wrapped around an inner subtle *lingam* (penis) covering its mouth with hers. The tantrik's job is to rouse her by yogic exercises and breath control. She must then be induced to straighten up and move upwards along the spinal column, piercing each *chakra* as she rises. Evidently, the first happening is quite disconcerting and jolts the meditator. One tantrik describes the coiled serpent as a "powder magazine," which probably accounts for the sensation of a blast-off. Having pierced all the six *chakras*, *kundalini* bursts through the top of the palate and enlightenment occurs.

In the erotic ritual, woman stands for *shakti* or power, and men for *shiva*, with the final union of *shivashakti*. Rites involve meditation on esoteric diagrams, the paraphernalia of a *puja* using skulls, flowers dipped in sandalwood paste, and water pots for purifying the food. Liquor is passed around in a human skull and the taboo foods are eaten. Participants address each other as mother and father. In the final scene a male approaches a female with the plea "Mother, please permit me to achieve enlightenment." They enter into elaborate foreplay which would gladden the heart of a Havelock Ellis, Van de Velde, Johnson and Masters, or David Reuben. The *kundalini* is raised through each *chakra* by concentrating on that part of the anatomy where each is located — the genitalia, abdomen, navel, chest, throat, and a spot between the eyebrows. The belief is that at the height of ecstasy the body turns cold and the brain white hot. After it is done, the serpent sleeps again. Another gangbang of immense cosmic significance is over.

Conventional Indians are shocked at such goings on. They thoroughly disapproved of Rajneesh and his cavorting devotees. To them *kundalini* yoga is pure and clear of all carnality. Ashrams and yoga institutions teach it, and these proponents express disgust over the perversion of this meditative form. One such is a godwoman, the sixty-year old Nirmala Devi or H.H. Mataji — her holiness, the Mother. Hers is still a middle-sized outfit, trailing far behind the big league of Maharishi Mahesh, Prabhupad, and Rajneesh. But she is fast catching on among middle-class Indian womanhood in search of aid and comfort. "Don't fall at my feet. I am the Mother. You can sit on my lap or even my head."

She can raise your *kundalini* to "instant realization." Duplicating the famous Indian rope trick, your coiled serpent immediately shoots upward in her presence and pierces the fontanel bone. No contortions, no rigorous piety. Hold your palms up in front of her and it happens. Even her picture has the power. One of these show her palms decorated with a crimson cross because her beginnings are Christian. Her condemnation of Rajneesh and tantric sex has a familiar ring — satanic fornicators are spreading demonic vibrations, she claims, and she vows she will repel the onslaught of the forces of darkness.

When H.H. Mataji makes the *kundalini* rise you feel a breeze on your palms and temples. This is IT! This is your hotline of communication to the Universal. Her yoga bestows immense power. She has cured terminal cancer in ten minutes flat! But she doesn't set up cancer cure centers because "enlightenment" comes first, she says. Vegetables on farms "doubled in size" when given "vibrated water" touched by her.

She is scathingly contemptuous of Rajneesh's tantrism and group grope therapies. She believes he is out to destroy the virtue of Indian women. "Westerners are wicked, dirty and morally corrupt," she says. "We Indians are paragons of virtue."

Despite her xenophobia she lives in luxury in London as wife of a former shipping director and, having a produced a family, proves she is not against sex of the down-to-earth sort. She is against celibacy for women and believes they must marry to keep society from disintegrating. "I am God," says she — so now you know that God is female, bangled, bejewelled, perfumed, sari-clad and, with some justification, proud of her excellent rice pilafs.

Tantric concepts have significantly influenced the best in Hindu art and sculpture. Modern painters borrow heavily from its symbolism of male and female cosmograms. Outsiders are often puzzled about this prominent exhibition of sexuality alongside Indian victorianism.

Most religions condone sex only as a nasty necessity. Similarly, Indian religions see detachment as a sublime condition where worldly reality becomes the illusion replaced by a spiritual reality. Anything which interposes between this kind of vision is rejected as pernicious. The apostle Paul would have thoroughly approved of Indian saints and their celibacy. For instance, Ramakrishna (1836-1886), after whom the Ramakrishna Mission is named, warned against the lures of the flesh and identified "woman and gold" as the main obstacles to "seeing God."

Koestler described Hindus as being "semen-obsessed." Magical properties are ascribed to semen which are drained by sexual intercourse. Virtue is therefore attached to celibacy. According to one legend, Swami Vivekanand, the disciple of Ramakrishna who first took Hinduism to the United States, was consumed by the "fire in his loins." To burn the "biological fire" with "physical fire" he sat on a red hot griddle. Thereafter he was able to read through the entire *Encyclopedia Britannica* in a couple of days. When someone dared to doubt this, he recited pages word for word. "My photographic memory is due to my observing celibacy or *brahmacharya*. Breath control also helped me," said he.

If sexual abstinence enhanced intellectual ability, the complete control of the mechanism of sex could achieve even greater marvels. According to some ancient texts on yoga it is possible to suck in milk, water, and mercury through the penis. Semen ejaculated into a woman and drawn up again makes a man immortal. Those whose semen travels upwards are like the gods and those who retain it are, like them, immortal. (Women don't have a chance here because of their ridiculous

physiology.)

Celibacy is practiced by Indian religious leaders and some politicians to gain physical courage, mental vigor, and spiritual power. Gandhi used this "power" in his nonviolent movement. It is said when some mass movement failed he conceded it was because he had "failed" to remain completely celibate mentally and spiritually.

Sexual abstinence gives rise to new life power, and when this power is directed into higher centers of consciousness it achieves "self-realization." Semen is a manifestation of grossness and *coitus reservatus* can be an act of mystical significance. However, the more rational hasten to explain it's not the retention of gallons of semen in the system which is significant. More importantly, the motive and will to procreate is turned inwards and transformed into a metaphysical event. But of course it is too much to expect mere Westerners to achieve this mastery. True tantrism is too deep for their shallow understanding. So instead they have taken up the licentious and degrading form of tantra which no "respectable" Indian would touch.

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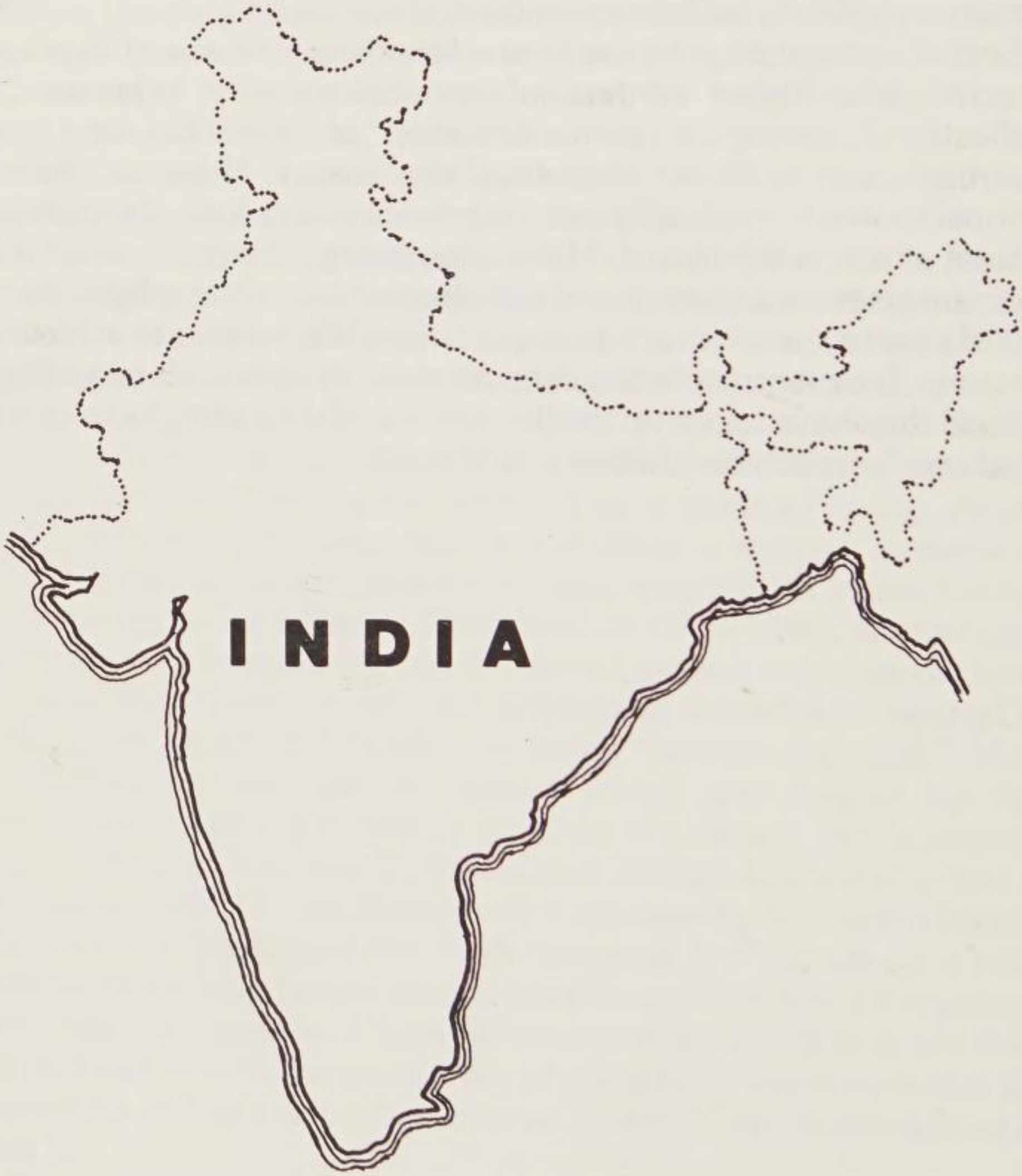
INDIA

Wanted: An Ethic of Responsibility

November 1983

If Indian society is in a state of crisis, we might take comfort from the fact that other nations are, too. On August 15th we celebrated the thirty-sixth anniversary of independence from foreign domination. For those of us who were young and full of hope back in 1947, each subsequent Independence Day is an occasion for sober introspection and extreme disquiet.

The resurrection of Gandhi through Attenborough's film shows us up badly as a nation torn by implacable hatreds and indulging in appalling brutality in communal riots whipped up by unscrupulous politicians. If anything we are becoming more and more fragmented into communal groups which make nonsense of our claim to being nonviolent and entirely tolerant of other religions.

The argument put forward by the pious is that we have lost sight of god. They see morality and law as of three kinds. At the top is divine law from which all human morality draws its inspiration through the interpretation of the Vedas, Koran, Bible, Gita, and other ancient writings. These laws are immutable. Not even the state must touch them.

Next comes the law devised by humans to regulate society at a secular level. And finally, there is the law of the jungle where savage repression and injustice are inspired by the concept that might is right, and humans have turned godless.

This simplistic view of a highly complex system is put forward as an explanation to our moral crisis. It is argued that, secular law having succumbed to the law of the jungle, the balance can be restored by

returning to religion and reestablishing god's immutable laws. The crisis comes from the fact that there are too many scriptures, too many communities, and too many interpretations.

Religions like Christianity and Islam might have transcended ethnic and nationalist barriers to unite large areas of the world in a common cause, but no just world order has emerged thereafter. Instead, humankind has engaged in bloodier wars under the banner of religion, beginning with two centuries of conflict between Islam and Christendom in the Crusades. Today, in the same region, Islam confronts a Judaism overtly supported by Christendom.

The Indian subcontinent has witnessed some of the cruelest conflicts between Hindu and Muslim. Even sects and subsects war with each other, like the *shia* and *sunni* sects of Pakistan. In addition, we now have strong upward pressure being exerted by low-caste and out-caste in Hindu society resulting in massacres of Harijans and weaker communities.

These are some of the more extreme cases where divine sanction supports social repression of the worst kind. Clearly there has to be something badly flawed in the argument that morality derived from ancient scripture is the divine will of some supreme being if all it provides is a pious excuse to slaughter those who differ from us. How can any value system be described as worthwhile and moral which inspires its adherents to go into temple, church, mosque, and *gurudwara*, to fall on one's knees in prayer, and then come out into the streets and fall on the necks of others with swords and spears?

"But take religion away and there can be no morality," our theists argue. "All ethical obligation is derived from the scriptures and we cannot be moral unless we are religious."

And yet our religious ideologies have an equally black record in their denial of justice, in genocide, torture, and tyranny. These are the most disturbing aspects of the resurgence of obscurantism and fundamentalism in Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism in this country. Here bigotry urges followers of the faith that the revival of obsolete systems of morality will not only help us retrieve our lost innocence, but they will help preserve the communal identity of each group against the other. So our much vaunted Indian tolerance operates on a very short fuse. The smallest unsubstantiated rumor, like the discovery of what looks like a cow's tail thrown into a Hindu temple, or what appears to be a piece of abhorrent pork found in a Muslim mosque, sparks off an orgy of looting and killing. No remorse is felt afterwards. Nobody searches their conscience.

The pious regard conscience as a god-given virtue. But since there is no evidence that god exists, the argument that conscience is thus gifted becomes a precarious premise.

The truth is that conscience is a faculty, like reason and intelligence. And like reason it must be nurtured and cultivated. In such a context morality means having a strong sense of justice guided, not by obscure texts or by an external supernatural being, but by reason. Morality must answer a valid and continuing need for justice and happiness in human terms.

Customs and traditions evolved by a process of trial and error over long ages finally arrived at the most reasonable norms for benefitting the maximum number. When a particular concept ceased to serve that purpose, or no longer seemed relevant to the times, it could be discarded. This kind of flexibility made for progressive societies until religion interposed. Thereafter all moral action stemmed from books supposedly written by deity. And to explain this esoteric wisdom to the unlettered, we needed a priestly class. Justice in this life was no longer the aim of moral laws. Instead salvation was assured in some nebulous hereafter. In place of the greatest good for the greatest number, the greatest good was now only for the privileged few.

Obscurities of text covered over all knowledge. Devotees were told they were too thick-headed to understand its complexities. Only priests and prophets understood the texts they themselves had written.

But to the Atheist, "true knowledge" is quite different. Premnath Bazaz in his book *Secular Morality* sees intelligence which seeks true knowledge as the faculty of

> critically examining matter, especially one's behavior, and intelligently grasping the core of a problem. It transcends current prejudices, detests inequality, opposes evil traditions, spurns superstitions, checks passions, regulates emotions and refines moral laws.

Inevitably, even as a faculty, conscience becomes strongly coloured by one's social milieu. Therefore a just and moral environment is needed to produce just and moral people. At this point the quality of education imparted to the young has particular significance.

However, our Indian system is based largely on making children learn indigestible chunks of information by heart. It makes no pretence to cultivate a child's mind. Nor are young people taught to think in terms of moral challenge. In fact, any questioning of ancient traditions, religious

ritual, and irrational beliefs is regarded as antisocial in spirit and quickly stifled.

As a result we have a morality based on duty and rooted in taboos. This absolves people from bothering too much about others' suffering. Poverty and disease are ascribed to a person's sins in some former existence. He is therefore suffering retribution and will earn merit again for the next life by manfully enduring his misery in this life. The pervasive theory of karma explains why individuals believe they can accumulate merit, or generate moral good magically by self-torture, long and arduous fasting, sexual abstinence, ritual purity, food taboos, caste loyalty, total abnegation, and much else.

The present malaise which afflicts our young is that the futility of such exercises soon becomes evident to them. They also see that a good deal of hypocrisy is practiced by the most pious among us. And those who preach abnegation and detachment from worldly things are the ones who perpetually seek money and material gain. Since emotion rather than reason has inspired their morality since childhood, their religious base is quickly eroded by cynicism.

In an effort to stem this rot among our students, the University Grants Commission decided that universities must include papers on morals and ethics — though not the ethics which is regarded as a branch of philosophy.

Moral education was to be taught to the young! — through a study of the lives of great Indian saints, through yoga, transcendental meditation, daily assemblies with readings of scriptures, lectures by religious leaders, and seminars. Students displaying outstanding moral values were to be given special recognition.

Only Bombay University made a halfhearted attempt to act on this directive, and from the few lectures given there by people from the Rajneesh ashram it was evident that no critical inquiry was expected from the young. No dynamic confrontation was to take place regarding the incredible problems we face as a multireligious nation. The scheme envisaged large numbers of students being systematically subjected to a barrage of "inert ideas" in the confident hope that it would make them actively virtuous.

Absolutist systems of morality spawn fanatics. And when large numbers are indoctrinated, a herd mind emerges to which new ideas, new ways, and other cultures are anathema. Morality merely reinforces prejudice.

Herd morality is demonstrated through the well-known fable of the country where everybody walked lame and people were brought up to

believe that this was how all decent self-respecting citizens should walk. Then along came the traveller who walked without defect and appeared to manage excellently. Instead of learning from him, they laughed him to scorn. The herd mind cannot admit to the superiority evident in those who are different, so it implies that it could only have been achieved through a drastic loss of virtue.

This, in part, explains why Indians are so xenophobic and ready to see all cultures as vastly inferior to their own. It comes over strongly in our films where the emancipated foreign woman (usually white) is projected as decadent, but the socially restricted and pious Indian heroine is declared full of virtue.

In the same way, the enlightened and the different are sneered at as "modern" (cheap), and those who refuse to go along with the cultural identity of the herd are accused of being un-Indian (lacking in patriotism).

The purpose of education should be to provide young people with an unfettered critical intelligence leading to creative self-actualization. They should be allowed the courage to question, challenge, change, and discard. Such autonomy provides complete scope for developing potential and using their minds. In the final analysis the roots of a workable morality are not found in religion, but in our interpersonal dependence as social animals, where the greatest good for all inspires all moral action.

In such a dynamic system of ethics there is no place for narrow sectarian loyalties. Children cannot be raised to be "good" sikhs, "good" Hindus, "good" Muslims, "good" Christians in the communal sense of goodness. Instead, they will be raised to be worthwhile humans.

While religion has served humanity when it has sincerely concerned itself with a search for civilized alternatives to the law of the jungle, true spirituality has really come from a cultivation of the intellect.

In India today we need a morality which is free of organized fanaticism and superstition. It must be a morality which can exorcise the fear and hate which tears apart the fabric of our society so that every community can love the other as passionately as they now pray for each other's destruction.

Such secular morality offers better dividends than that which is based on obscure texts. It is possible, without the benefit of dogma, to nurture in the young the universal qualities of love, truthfulness, compassion, courage, self-sacrifice, brotherhood, and much else. Spiritual culture here does not mean a mindless ritualism, blind belief, and irrational

emotion. It is a self-actuated system of ethical judgment which is proof against cynicism because it touches one's personal self image. Our young people earnestly need to be taught to rise above the many narrow loyalties of religion and culture that divide us.

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A Christmas That Wasn't
A Short Story

December 1983

"Eat, eat," Himmat Singh urged, piling Miss Gow's plate once more. "Green vegetables good. Make strong. . . ."

His English was limited, but he made himself understood to the missionary. Meals were usually long silent affairs, except for his gentle admonishing as if she were a fussy little girl. Standing behind her chair he kept her plate well filled, and though she made gestures of protest she meekly ate it all.

Watching them from my place across the immense mahogany table, I wondered about the curious pair. Felicity Gow was over seventy, short and dumpy with heavy hanging jowls. Her jutting lower lip and her turned down mouth reminded me of a cross between a mastiff and a bulldog. Her face was broad, her eyes a wintry blue. She had long hairs growing from a mole on the left side of her snub nose. They bristled and quivered when she was annoyed. Her half-dozen chins merged into her chest without any visible neck, and her bosom jutted out so prominently that she could easily have breakfasted off her front.

She had come out to India that February and rented this old vacant bungalow in the Kumaon Himalayas. Allen Orchard was a small property above the township of Bhowali, two miles up on a remote ridge.

Himmat Singh was Miss Gow's *khidmatgar*, a kind of cook-cum-butler-cum-valet. He was fifty, tall and dignified with the lined leathery features of a Kumaon hillman who has weathered the years. Always very correct, he wore a resplendent personal livery of a kind which went out with the raj. It consisted of a knee-length coat of crimson with a

monogram worked on the front in gold thread, white fitting trousers, and a snow turban with a red band around it.

When I went down to Bhowali, shopkeepers and dealers were curious about the kind of life I lived with the crazy English Miss Sahib. They hadn't expected me to last more than a few weeks. "The lady who came before you stayed only two days," the postmaster chuckled.

But my duties were light. In return for my board and lodging and a small stipend, I kept Miss Gow company, read to her, and wrote her letters. But she reserved the right to dismiss me without notice. This was because she expected, any moment, to be lifted into heaven.

"I haven't come out to the Himalayas to live a life of ease," she said sternly. "I'm here to await the second coming of Christ. The world is going to end this year. But before the wicked world is judged for their sins, we Chosen Ones will be taken up, unseen and unknown."

It was a very intriguing idea. I wondered what escape velocity Felicity Gow would need to pull free of the earth's gravity. How would she control yaw and swing in a body as top-heavy as hers? And would there be any sonic boom as she went?

"I belong to the Tongues People," she told me. "When the holy spirit is on us we can prophesy in many languages. We know the end of the world is this year."

This belief sometimes made her act strangely. One of the more startling events during my stay was the time she woke me in the middle of a violent summer storm at night, and I watched her from my window as she put on an astonishing performance for more than an hour out in the garden.

Thunderbolts crashed on the hilltops and the air crackled with static. At each flash she lifted her thick arms to the sky and cried, "Hallelujah! Praise God!"

I fully expected to see her struck down as she stood there, hollering. Her grey hair and clothes blowing in the wind, she clung resolutely to the tall pole on which she always kept a union jack flying during the day.

The clouds were low and threatening. But when they split open, to her disappointment no chariot of fire stood revealed. Instead the rain came down in torrents and quite doused her fervour. She scuttled into the house, drenched and disappointed. I heard Himmat Singh scold her as he helped her out of her dripping clothes.

The man slept in the small ante-room to her bedroom. He made her bed, washed and ironed her clothes, and tidied her things. He also controlled her money and went into Bhowali to cash her cheques.

On such occasions he usually came back drunk. His hands trembled

when he held a dish out at the table and the spoon rattled gainst its side. Once, while bringing in a tureen of soup, he fell against the sideboard and sent crockery crashing to the floor.

Looking quickly at me, he grinned foolishly and surveyed his ruined livery. Miss Gow didn't move a muscle. But I notice that she flushed, as if she was embarrassed that an outsider had been given glimpse of a family skeleton. The man went out and returned in a clean coat. Not a word was said throughout the meal.

Perhaps some part of her persuaded her that we really didn't count, he a Hindu and I a professed Atheist. We were there only to serve. There wasn't any time left to worry about saving us, not at this eleventh hour. Not when the whole world over the "Chosen Ones" had quietly begun the countdown to blast-off. We were definitely doomed.

But in some perverse way she seemed to need the reassurance of the man's masculine presence. She probably admired his solidity and confidence and even enjoyed being ordered about by him.

The bungalow was quite cheerless and sparsely furnished with old-fashioned Victorian pieces from the time of some British settler. There was no plumbing or electricity. Some time during the day a sweeper materialised from somewhere, swept the house, threw out the garbage, and cleaned the "thunder-boxes." Early every morning a slant-eyed, handsome hillwoman appeared with a can of fresh milk. Nobody else ever called on us.

One of my duties was to read to Miss Gow after dinner. For light we had an ancient Hinks paraffin lamp. She had brought out crates of books and tracts — "for spiritual nourishment" — she said. It was dull stuff indeed and dealt chiefly with biblical prophecies and the appearance of the antichrist who, she said, was born on February 5, 1962, at 7 A.M. Eastern Standard Time, somewhere in the Middle East, according to Jeanne Dixon. This diabolical human was already trying to gain control of our planet with the help of an equally diabolical apparatus called an electronic computer.

I waded through it patiently while she sat and listened, occasionally breaking wind with a sound that rattled the shutters. "Hallelujah!" she would then intone, fervently and with evident relief.

At midnight she let me retire, but remained herself until Himmat Singh ordered her to bed. But she was always up and dressed by four. "Because our Bible says, (Matt. 24:44) 'Therefore be ye prepared for in such an hour as ye think not, the Son of Man cometh.' "

To make sure she was in the right place at the right moment, she hadn't left the estate since she came. By Indian standards she lived very

well, but she whined a great deal and saw herself surrounded by agents of the devil bent on shaking her in her faith.

For instance, sometimes Himmat Singh was downright mean to her and made her cry. Sometimes the sweeper absented himself for days, forcing her to clean her own chamber pot or use the bore-hole privy some distance from the bungalow. She hated that. She was mortally afraid of spiders, and the place was infested with them. Then draughts came up through the pine planks and chilled her where she sat, all exposed. Squatting was so undignified and also hard on her old knees. But above all, suppose the trumpet should sound and catch her thus, with her pants down? She might so easily be overlooked in the Entebbe-like airlift of the chosen ones, simply because she was too slow to get to her feet, settle her clothing, and make herself decent.

In the third week of December the weather changed. Anticipating snow, Himmat Singh had a man bring loads of oak logs up from Bhowali. With the year drawing to an end, Miss Gow was sure she wouldn't be around to need fires for warmth. But I noticed she didn't object either.

A roaring fire in the large fireplace in the sitting room made it almost cozy. But chilly draughts came through cracks in the windows so we dressed warmly in coats and jerseys. Himmat Singh changed into a coat of the finest navy serge, old but well-preserved.

It was a Saturday, I recall — the last and final Sabbath Miss Gow expected to observe on earth. She always devoted a Sabbath to prayer and fasting. I was glad to have the day to myself and spent it by the fire in my room, reading and writing letters.

She stayed by the sitting room fire, dressed in her Sabbath frock, a grey silk, severe in cut, collared and cuffed. I know that she kept it within reach at night since it never would do to ascend into heaven in a nightgown.

The weather worked up a tremendous appetite in me, and I admired her willpower in being able to stay hungry all day. That evening it seemed to me Himmat Singh was taking longer than usual to announce dinner. But I knew he was working busily, for I could hear him.

"Dinner is served, Miss Sahib!" I finally heard him say.

"Ah!" Miss Gow exclaimed with relief, as if she'd been waiting, too. I came out of my room and followed her to the dining room. But when she saw the table she stopped.

"What's this?" she barked.

Himmat Singh beamed as he bowed low and drew back her chair.

"Happy kissmash, Miss Sahib," he cried.

A white cloth had been spread on the table. This he had decorated with winter oranges stuck with sprigs of cedar and fern. Lighted candles were fixed into pine cones, and a large bowl was filled with a bunch of early rhododendron blooms glowing blood red.

The ancient crockery was chipped and the silver tarnished, but the spread made up for that. On a platter in front of her chair was a large chicken, stuffed and roasted, paper frills round its legs. There was a cheese bake, mashed potatoes, peas, and creamed carrots. Small willow baskets were filled with walnuts and chestnuts. He had even baked a cake inscribed with the words "MARY XMAS!"

He surveyed his handiwork with a pleased expression. But standing behind Miss Gow I could see the hairs on the old woman's nose begin to quiver against the candlelight.

"What does this mean, Himmat Singh?" she snapped.

"Kissmash Day!" he laughed. "Aha!" He clapped his hands, delighted that he'd been smart enough to let the great day creep up on her and surprise her.

She stiffened her back, turned down her mouth, and settled her many chins deep into her broad bosom.

"We Tongues People do *not* celebrate Christmas," she said harshly. "It is a pagan festival. There is no historical proof that Christ was born on the 25th of December. In fact, today is the winter equinox and it was observed by sun-worshipping pagans as a day for drunken orgies and wickedness to honour the god of wine. There's nothing Christian about the 25th of December."

He couldn't follow a word, but he could see she was deeply offended and that puzzled him. Turning to me she snapped "Explain it to him, please."

Leaving out the historical bit I simply said that she didn't observe Christmas. He was incredulous.

"But it's an English custom," he cried in Hindustani. "All white people celebrate kissmash!"

"Not this one."

"What does the old hag know?" he exclaimed scornfully.

"I was here when the British were here, so I know. She only came this year."

"What does he say?" Miss Gow asked impatiently.

"He's very surprised and he wants to know what he should do with all this —" I waved my hand at the feast, anxious to get down to it at once.

"He must take it away, of course," she shrilled. "Remove it, Himmat Singh! Remove it!"

"I cook kissmash dinner for gavrmint house sahibs," he protested in English, deeply hurt. "They say besht dinner they ever eat."

Sitting down she again gestured at the food. "Take it away," she repeated.

He tried to catch my eye as I sat down, but I avoided his gaze. For a long moment he said nothing. Then wordlessly, he picked up the dishes and took them out to the pantry. When the last one had been cleared, he removed the decorations, the flowers, and the nuts. Then he came and stood as usual behind her chair.

"Now!" she said, pleased to have scored off against him this once. "Now we'll have plain omelettes and bread and butter."

Very harmless fare that, nothing which might possibly be mistaken for any kind of celebration of a pagan event.

Himmat Singh didn't reply, but stared straight ahead. She had to turn right around in her chair and look up at him.

Finally he said, "Only three eggs. Tomorrow I go Bhowali for butter. No butter. If it snows, hens not give. So no breakfast."

"Then we'll have the vegetables," she announced, pointedly avoiding the festive fowl, stuffed and frilled. "Bring those."

"Eat some, eat all, or eat nothing," he said flatly in Hindustani, and she made me translate it.

Neither spoke after that. The heavy silence went on and on. I stole a glance at my watch — five minutes, ten minutes! I was ravenous, but I knew I wouldn't go without. Neither would he. Indeed, it looked as if the actual celebration was going to be left to the Hindu and the Atheist while the Christian went supperless to bed.

But Felicity Gow loved food and he was a good cook, with considerable experience in her kind of cuisine. She hadn't eaten anything since dinner the night before. I thought she'd fly into a fury, but to my surprise she began to cry instead, making small mewling sounds as she wept. The front of her grey silk soon had a large damp patch.

He had won! Whistling tunelessly, as if from cold, he set about bringing back the food from the hot-case. Ignoring her completely, he carved the chicken and chatted cheerfully with me in Hindustani.

"How can she say the English don't celebrate kissmash?" he demanded, placing a drumstick on her plate. "All right, so she doesn't believe. Everyone has his own belief. She can eat with belief or she can eat without belief. It's up to her —"

To mollify her he leaned across with his carving knife and deftly shaved off the "MARY XMAS" from the cake. "Not kissmash now, Miss Sahib," he said in a bright voice as if she were a dumb child. "Eat

and enjoy. It not kissmash dinner, only *good* dinner."

She probably saw his reasoning as too facile and therefore of the devil. It still didn't alter the fact that the food had been prepared for a profane purpose. So she ate it without enjoyment, doggedly chewing her way through most of the chicken and more than a third of the rest. Not at any moment, by expression of gesture, did she let herself show she was eating in celebration.

He kept her plate filled throughout. Perhaps overeating can also be one way of mortifying the flesh, a kind of expiation of guilt. When she rose from the table she was glassy-eyed and had difficulty with her breathing.

Taking her place by the sitting room fire, she selected a chapter from the Book of Revelations for me to read — the scenario for doomsday. I hadn't progressed much when I saw she'd fallen into a torpid slumber, her head thrown back and her mouth open. She was a dainty snorer, the snores only slightly quivering her pug nose and the hairs on it.

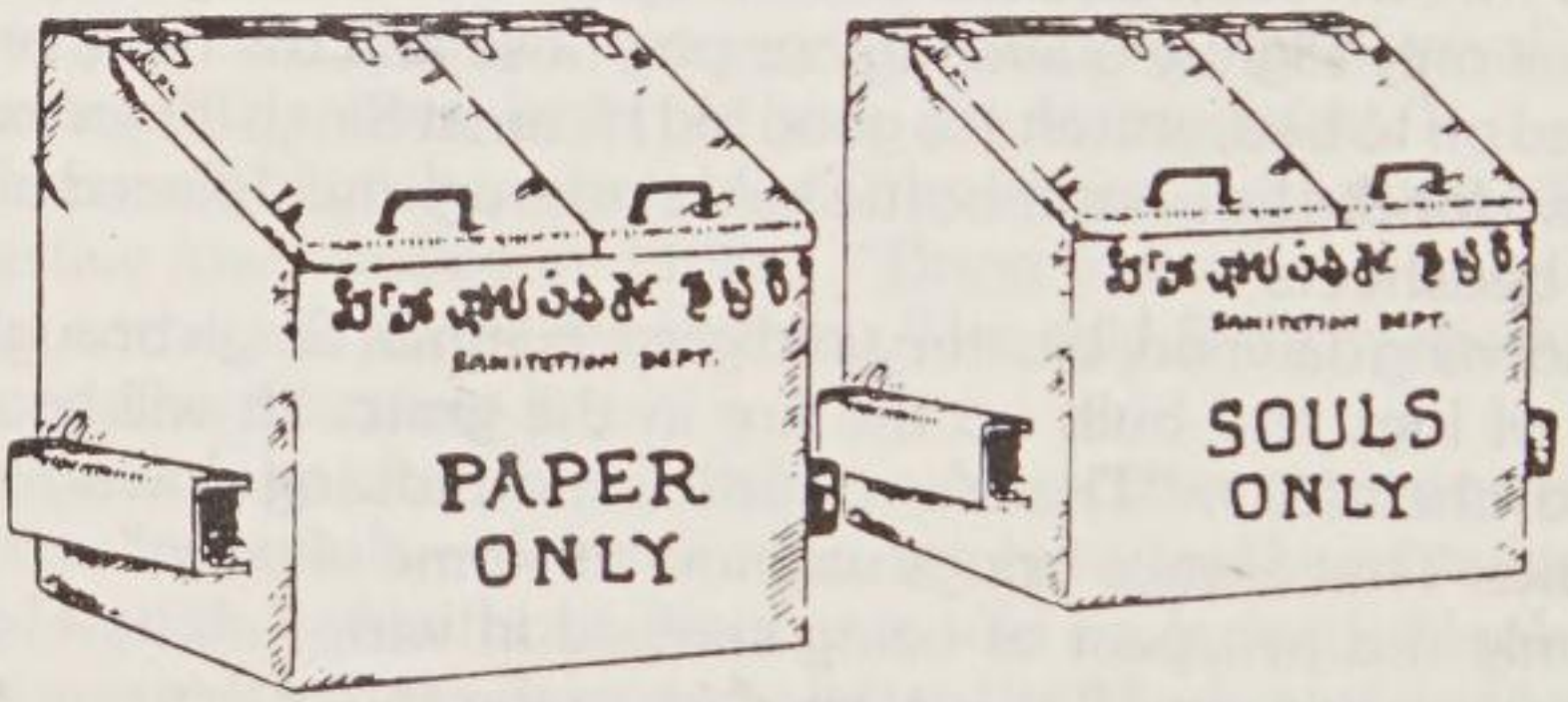
I slipped off to bed, grateful to good old Himmat Singh for an excellent dinner and for the hot water bottle he'd so thoughtfully placed between the cold bedsheets.

The morning dawned, blustery and grey. Himmat Singh brought in an armload of logs and built up the fire in the grate. "It will snow," he predicted cheerfully. "There's a north wind blowing down from the snowpeaks. That always brings us snow this time of year."

Suddenly the prospect of being snowed in with Felicity Gow was more than I could face. With just six days to the end of this crucial year, who knew what lunatic impulse would seize her next? She might launch herself off a peak in the expectation of being carried aloft on the wind. And supposing she *was* spirited away unseen and unknown, what earthly explanation would I give the police?

When I announced my decision to leave immediately, she seemed a little surprised. "I'd like to go before it snows and buses stop running down to the railhead," I explained. "I'll send a coolie up from Bhowali for my stuff."

She paid me a month's wage, confident I wouldn't survive to spend it, and let me go. Two Christmas seasons have passed since then. Doomsday hasn't happened yet. I sometimes wonder if she's still up there on that remote ridge, making a spectacle of herself in every summer storm, keenly scanning the skies for the chariot of fire, and seeing that Himmat Singh runs up the union jack every day to make sure she gets into heaven on the right immigration quota.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Recycling Old Souls

January 1984

A couple of years back, *India Today*, one of our leading English newsmagazines, published a story on rebirth under its "Science" section. A letter I wrote questioning the claims made was never published. The news report was on research done by a certain Dr. Satwant Pasricha for her doctoral thesis to prove that rebirth does take place. Her findings may be regarded as another uniquely Indian contribution to scientific knowledge.

In the middle of this year a monthly from Bombay featured an interview with the "scientist," and I thought it deserved some disinterested comment. Pasricha is a lecturer in the Department of Clinical Psychology at the prestigious National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences in Bangalore. I wish I could be impressed by her credentials as an authority in this particularly nebulous field of research. Shortly after she published her thesis she travelled to the U.S. to work with another specialist in hearsay, Dr. Ian Stephenson.

Pasricha is described as a humorless, prim woman who prefers to keep a low profile. Her peculiar "scientific" obsession takes her to many corners of the country to investigate cases of rebirth reported in our press. "It's no sensational story but a cold clinical fact confirmed by rigorous criteria and meticulous research," she says of her startling thesis. In a population of more than six hundred million humans, it rests on precisely 250 investigated cases! At that average, one can hardly accuse her of gross exaggeration.

Her "meticulous research" involves contacting people who know of anyone who recalls his/her former life. She then talks to the subject's

parents and neighbors. Having ascertained the previous existence did take place, she then gets in touch with others recalled by the subject. Cross-checking is done of facts, data, and significant dates of birth and death. In cases of suicide or murder, death certificates and postmortem reports are scrutinized. These are important because, says she, rebirth is more likely when a person dies suddenly by violence or accident.

Ancient Hindu texts put the number of rebirths at 8,400,000 for each soul. Most Oriental religions profess a belief in rebirth. At the end of this grueling round, one's karmic register tots up merit and demerit to square off the account before one is granted a certificate for salvation. That all this is entirely unverifiable doesn't concern a scientist of Pasricha's standing. After all, our papers always carry strange stories of children recalling former existences, rattling off entire books of ancient scripture in Sanskrit, or the whole Koran in Arabic.

Right here in Nagpur there is a young woman who claims she was born in a village in Bengal a hundred years ago and recalls details of her former life. But she stubbornly refuses to cooperate with rationalists prepared to investigate her claims.

More recently, our papers reported the appearance of an avatar of Mahatma Gandhi, but his claim lacked credibility and he was treated with derision. Indian godmen all seem to spring from a superior bloodline as avatars of Krishna, Shiva, or whatever.

Pasricha's research makes a distinction between genuine cases and mere nuts afflicted by the possession syndrome or multiple personality syndrome. All her subjects were under twelve years of age — undoubtedly impressionable children, given to fantasizing and gifted with a talent for shocking their elders.

A case of reincarnation can be detected as early as two years or when he/she learns to talk. Investigations should be completed as early as possible, before the former memories begin to fade. By the time the child is ten he becomes less reliable. After twelve, they are more prone to cunning, and, in fact, adults claiming to be reincarnations are usually frauds — which cancels out a good number of our godmen.

The incidence of rebirths is higher in regions where violence is prevalent, like the northern states of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar.

This odd fact, which I would describe as the Regional Syndrome, actually hinges on Dr. Pasricha's inability to speak any other than the northern languages of Hindi and Punjabi. She feels an interpreter would introduce an unscientific bias while questioning a south Indian child, so she has confined her research to children from the north. Interestingly,

she has yet to come across a soul from the north who has wandered south and still recalls its former mother tongue. Evidently, we Indians don't mix that easily even after we are dead.

However, it is heartening to know that caste barriers are being crashed by some more enterprising souls. For instance, Swaranlata was born into a north Indian family of the priestly Brahmin caste in 1969, but she claimed to belong to the untouchable caste. Pasricha found her a normal child except that she had a marked fear of trains, refused to go to school, and was very stubborn.

When she was three some untouchables approached her father for wood to roast a wild boar they had killed. Swaranlata not only urged him to give it, but expressed a desire to join in the feast since they were all one.

To her family's consternation, she then claimed her real name was Shanti, and her husband a certain Rajinder Singh who lived in a hut near the railway lines where, she recalled, she'd been run over while picking coal.

Pasricha's investigation confirmed all this, notching up another "hit" for her. But one must wonder what was Swaranlata's subsequent history. It is unlikely that a Brahmin family would want to keep a daughter proven to be a former obnoxious untouchable for fear of social ostracism. Nor will anyone come forward to marry her when she reaches a marriageable age.

Indian films make imaginative use of the rebirth theory and star-crossed lovers often turn up in different guise in another birth, recognize each other immediately, and finally find happiness. Though no study has yet been made, it is possible that many of the suicide pacts made by young lovers, who cannot hope to marry because of restrictions of caste and religion, reflect this belief. A police officer once told me that he had to ban the screening of a particular film in a small district town where he was posted because it dealt with just such a tragedy and encouraged a spate of suicides among young men and women.

The common belief is that an untimely death leaves a soul unfulfilled and unhappy. It therefore seeks to return and finish its existence before going on to the next. When abortion was legalized, there were many orthodox people who opposed it on these grounds. And when birth control was introduced as a national programme, some argued that such worldly considerations as population control should not be allowed to interfere with human existence at the essentially spiritual level — an argument which raises the laughable vision of hordes of

unfulfilled souls scrambling about wildly on finding a rubber condom interposed between them and ultimate salvation.

When quizzed about this particular point of "untimely death" and popular folklore, Dr. Pasricha's replied, "Well, this is a belief and part of spiritual life and religion, and I would not like to comment on it."

According to her research, 48 percent of the cases studied died violently in the previous life — eight times more than what usually occurs.

But if indeed souls were getting reborn like mad all the time, we now have a rational explanation for India's population boom — it's nothing but the fall-out from countries with zero growth whose souls are descending on this country in large numbers to make sure they get back onto the merry-go-round.

Such levity would shock the no-nonsense Pasricha. "Let's be clear about this," she says, "what I am pursuing is scientific research. I try to verify the claims of reincarnation. I am trying to establish the possibility of reincarnation, not to find validity of various religious beliefs." Which is ridiculous, of course, because the concept of "soul" is nothing but a religious superstition. And the biggest hole in her thesis is that neither she nor any of the clever ancients of centuries ago have yet devised any "rigorous criteria" to verify that it even exists as an entity distinct from the physical self.

But she feels she's on firm ground because cases of "rebirth" turn up the world over, even in societies which don't believe in it. "Coming to Hindu belief," she says, "it is more or less a moral attitude that's expressed through these doctrines like the karma doctrine. I have nothing to say about these religious texts. Mine is scientific work, verifying facts through field work. It is neither philosophy nor ethics."

Indeed, it is not. But it is not science, either. It is ballyhoo.

Unisex with A Difference

April 1984

Tourists to India are often puzzled and intrigued to see small groups of exotic sari-clad women on city streets, heavily made-up, with hennaed hands, elaborate coiffures, and garish jewelry. They sway their hips provocatively as they walk and gesticulate in an exaggerated manner, but they all have rough male voices. These are not transvestites, but members of a widespread religious cult, a bizarre "sisterhood" of eunuchs or *hijras*. No serious study has yet been done of their strange beliefs, but in Bombay, at any rate, they have become one of the "musts" for tourists along with the "cage girls" of the city's red-light areas.

There is no census of the number of such eunuchs in India, but despite a law against emasculation the community continues to grow. They hold annual conventions to draw the government's attention to their grievances, and two even stood as candidates for election in 1962, though without success. Had they won, their presence in the central or state legislature would have caused considerable dismay and amusement. Indians regard them with embarrassment and derision mixed with a little fear. It is believed that emasculation endows them with great magical power, and a *hijra*'s curse is thought to be particularly malevolent.

Eunuchs have been part of oriental tradition as bodyguards in harems and as trusted slaves. One usually associates them with Islamic societies. In India they also taught music and dancing to women of the upper classes.

But today the cult is a religious one. It takes in both Muslim and Hindu

devotees. In fact, some ancient Hindu legends around mythical heroes describe them as *hijras* with magical powers and enormous *shakti* or psychic power.

The patron deity is a mother goddess called Bahuchara-mata, who rides a rooster or a peacock. It is said that this beautiful young woman was once waylaid by brigands and she cut off her breasts with a dagger and offered them to her captors. This put them off so effectively that she was able to preserve her virginity. Sexual abstinence, self-mutilation, and similar forms of torment are part of her worship. Men choosing to turn *hijra* identify with her completely by rendering themselves sexless and thereafter living as women.

Such complete identification is not uncommon particularly in Hindu ascetic cults. But it is difficult to say how many who opt for castration do so out of their own volition. According to a report presented last year to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, there are up to half a million men in India and Pakistan who have been made eunuchs against their will. Many are young boys kidnapped and then castrated by the sect. There are also many true hermaphrodites among them, given away as children by parents when the child's sex was in doubt.

Hijras in India earn their living only by singing and dancing. Having found out the homes where children have been born, they present themselves to bless the child by singing lullabies and transferring some of their *shakti* to it. If the householders turn them away or do not pay enough, they might curse the baby instead. No pious Indian is prepared to invite the wrath of the goddess.

All *hijras* are able-bodied men giving rise to the belief that emasculation also endows them with great physical strength and health. Adult males turning eunuch are usually impotent sexually. Here again one comes across the pernicious "law of karma." Emasculation will not only save one from being born female in the next existence, it will also assure full sexual vigor for at least seven subsequent births. However, there are also others who seek castration only as devotees of Bahuchara-mata.

Hijras are found in all Indian cities where they live in closed communities under a head who acts as a kind of abbess and directs their affairs and sees to the equal distribution of all their earnings from dancing and begging. Any man desiring to join the cult first takes such a head as his guru, and thereafter is addressed as his daughter.

There is a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim in their rituals. For instance, in Indore there is the tomb of a *hijra* saint named Saroopa who was worshipped by the Hindu family of the maharaja of this former

Indian state. The money for their mosque was donated by the Muslim ruler of Hyderabad. Temple and mosque alike are used for worship by Hindu and Muslim eunuchs with similar rituals. It is ironical that only in this community of castrates does one find complete communal harmony!

Some couples go through rites of marriage within their group, and they have their own laws of property and inheritance. In cities like Baroda and Indore some *hijras* are rich landowners with houses which they rent out. But most are very poor and use young novices for purposes of male prostitution.

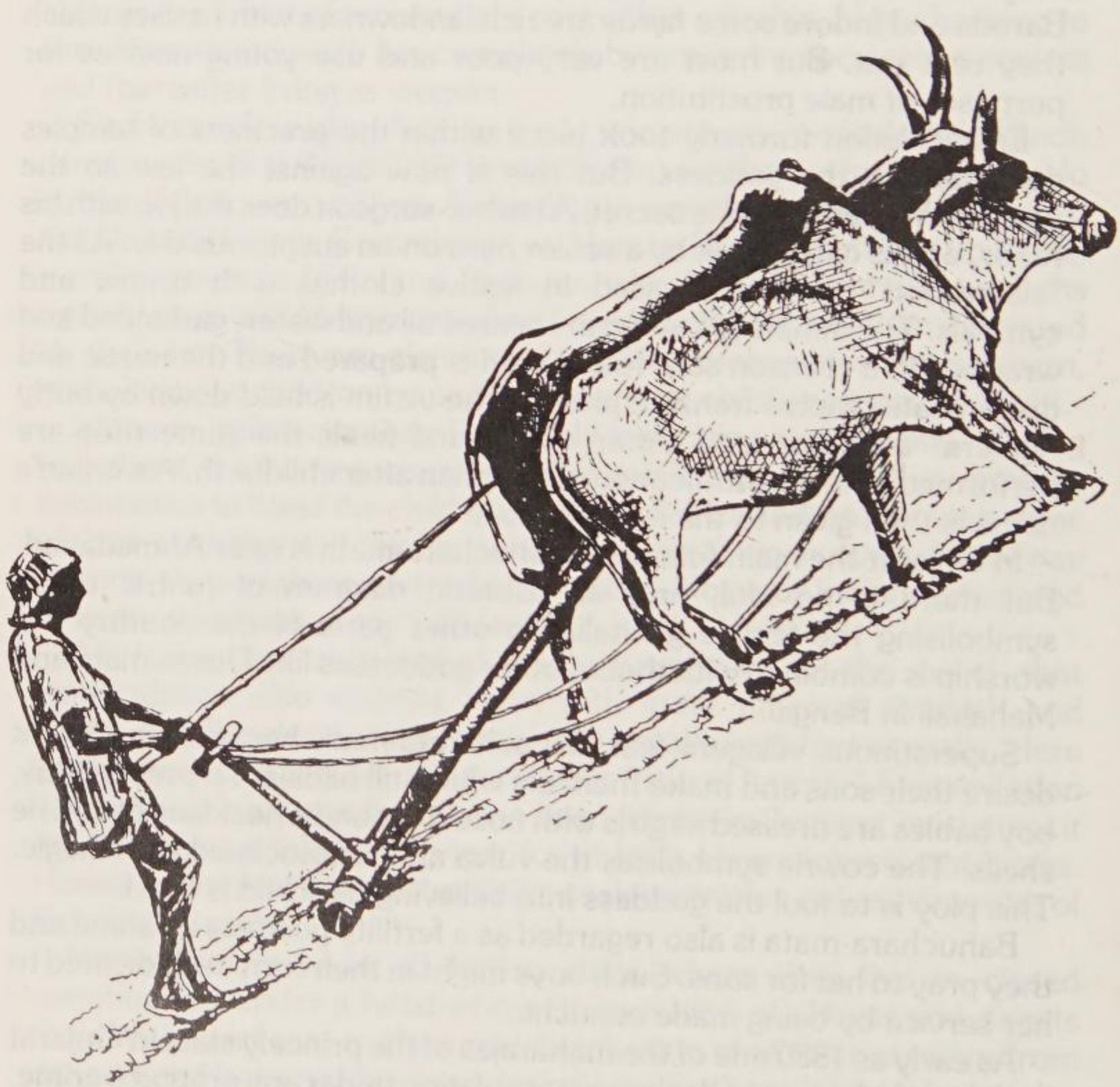
Emasculation formerly took place within the precincts of temples dedicated to the goddess. But this is now against the law so the operation is performed in secret. A barber-surgeon does the job with his razor, or it is carried out by a senior *hijra* on an auspicious day. All the "sisterhood" attends dressed in festive clothes with drums and cymbals. The initiate is bathed in scented oil and water, garlanded and wrapped in a crimson sari. Ritual food is prepared and the music and drum beats reach a frenzied pitch as the victim is held down by burly "sisters" and castrated. After the wound heals the same rites are performed as in the purification of a woman after childbirth. A woman's name is then given to the new member.

In Gujarat the main temple of Bahuchara-mata is near Ahmedabad. But there is no idol, only an esoteric diagram of tantric origin symbolising the female genitalia. In other parts of the country her worship is combined with that of other goddesses like Durga-mata and Mahakali in Bengal.

Superstitious villagers fear Bahucharata-mata because she might desire their sons and make them die while still babies. To prevent this, boy babies are dressed as girls with nose rings and a necklace of cowrie shells. The cowrie symbolises the vulva and is associated with magic. This ploy is to fool the goddess into believing the child is a girl.

Bahuchara-mata is also regarded as a fertility goddess by some and they pray to her for sons. Such boys might in their turn be dedicated to her service by being made eunuchs.

As early as 1880 one of the maharajas of the princely state in Gujarat had the good sense to declare emasculation under any pretext a crime. Today a section of the Indian Penal Code forbids it. But this clause does not cover self-emasculation. In any case, even when other members of the cult perform the operation on initiates, the law is never invoked and the practice continues to flourish.



Holy Cow!

May 1984

Over a hundred years back, in 1857, the British raj was rudely shaken by a rebellion which broke out first among Indian soldiers and quickly spread to the populace, particularly in north and central India. Colonial historians call it the Indian mutiny, but our national writers describe it as our first war of independence. Among the reasons for this revolt was the rumour that the religious purity of Hindu and Muslim soldiers was at risk with the introduction of a new cartridge in the army. To prime their muzzle-loaders the men had to tear off the paper casing with their teeth. Among the Hindus it was rumoured that the protective coating of grease was beef tallow, while the Muslims believed it was lard from that abomination called the pig.

Today, beef tallow is back again making headlines, though we don't expect to see a repeat of the bloody scenario of 1857. However, the opposition is getting a lot of mileage out of the accusation that because of the government's "criminal" neglect, thousands of unknowing Hindus have become *bhrasth* (impure) and lost their essential Hindu-ness.

The lid blew off when officials discovered a letter of credit in favour of a manufacturer of hydrogenated cooking oil which he was marketing as *shudh vanaspati* or pure vegetable butter. The import license was for 130,000,000 rupees worth of beef tallow! Random sampling revealed he'd been mixing it with the *vanaspati*. In a country where beef-eating is seen as a heinous crime and the cow venerated as a mother (*mata*) this revelation has understandably caused feelings to run high.

Fortunately for us the culprit concerned is not a Muslim, but a Hindu,

otherwise we might have witnessed another bloody round of communal frenzy. Muslims slaughter and sell beef as well as eat it.

Hindu priests of certain shrines in places where this abomination has been detected now refuse to accept food and sweetmeats brought by devotees for the gods. Some pious Hindu groups have held ritual purification of such areas with a lavish use of Ganges' water among the filthiest rivers in the world.

To prevent further mischief by obscurantist politicians the government banned all import of tallow in June 1983. This has jeopardised thousands of jobs in small soap units where the tallow is used. It is also needed in many other consumer products, but these manufacturers are keeping a low profile for fear of losing both their market and their credibility.

The scandal has triggered off a debate on the nature of the "sin" committed by those who ingested this horrifying mix unsuspectingly. The *shankaracharya* of Dwarka, equivalent to a high pontiff (or at least one of them) has declared that all those who have "unknowingly" consumed it have not committed any sin. "There is no sin unless you do it knowingly and intentionally," he says. Besides, all those who have become *bhrasth* can perform suitable penances which any Brahmin priest can administer to them.

Sin as a notion concerned with morality and guilt is found chiefly in Islam and Christianity. But the Hindu concept of sin goes much further and covers every imaginable accident which might befall an ordinary householder in the course of a normal day. Unknowing or knowing, each carries its own penance. These transgressions are classified according to their gravity under *ati-pataka* (sins beyond classification), *maha-tataka* (great sins), *anu-pataka* (minor sins or mortal sins) and *upa-pataka* (venial sins).

Penance, or *prajapatya*, is tedious and elaborate and of many kinds. One might last twelve days in which the sinner eats precisely twenty-two mouthfuls of food only at night for the first three days, twenty-six mouthfuls during night and day for the next three days, twenty-eight mouthfuls thereafter, and complete fasting for the last three days.

Nirad Chaudhuri in his book, *Hinduism*, lists in some detail the various sins and their atonement. Among the most heinous of venial sins is to cause the death of a cow, wittingly or unwittingly. Penance is severe even if a farmer loses a cow from exposure, accident, or as prey to a tiger. Not a horn, bone, tail, or ear should be injured. One form of penance for a sinner guilty of bovicide is to go from door to door with a rope around his neck and grass in his mouth, begging for food by bellowing like a cow.

In all the astounding range of food taboos found in Hinduism, some even tied in with seasonal and astral control, some including vegetables like onion and garlic, the most supreme taboo is beef. Ritual impurity is attached even to the dishes in which it is cooked. Many Hindus attach the same odium to all flesh and fish; though one now finds the orthodox eating eggs, but these must be unfertilised ones — they are called "vegetarian eggs"!

In the nineteenth century, Hindus believed that one lost caste by crossing the sea. But when this belief became outdated a second superstition still persisted that those who visited beef-eating countries in the west had to undergo ritual purification before being accepted back into their own caste. Part of this penance involved swallowing five products of the sacred cow called *panch gavya* — milk, *ghee*, curd, urine, and dung. Lavish gifts had also to be made to Brahmin priests.

There is a constitutional clause which seeks to protect all milch cattle from slaughter, but this is not enough for orthodox Hindus who would like to see a total ban even on old and decrepit cattle being killed. For many months now a political agitation has been going on to stop the export of beef to the Gulf.

In 1979, when the Janata government was in power, the late Vinoba Bhave went on "a fast unto death" to urge the government to impose an all-India ban even on the slaughter of useless cattle. Morarji Desai, in keeping with his pious image, agreed to move a constitutional amendment. Fortunately, he didn't last long enough for that to come about. But while in office he appealed to all states to impose a ban. West Bengal, where 20 percent of the population eats beef, and Kerala, where 40 percent of the population — including some Brahmin castes — eat beef, refused to go along with this. We may not have a thriving beef exporting industry, but we do have a large leather industry which supports countless traditional craftsmen of the untouchable caste.

Most peasants are more pragmatic about their old cows and buffaloes and sell them to butchers in cities. Or they turn them loose in the jungle. These feral cattle do immense damage to forests and standing crops. Our city streets are filled with stray cattle to which the pious throw a morsel to acquire merit. It is certainly not out of any feelings of compassion that these gaunt creatures are allowed to live, feeding on garbage, stained rags, paper, and human excreta.

Bhave's plea as long as he lived was to have the government set centres to herd and maintain all our useless cattle. That would certainly have been something in a country which hasn't even got around yet to providing for its aged.

The argument put forward by the pious is that one should not kill the creature whose milk one has drunk. By the same yardstick, then, we should show even greater reverence for the buffalo. But whatever the argument, the whole problem leaves India with the largest cattle population and the lowest milk yield.

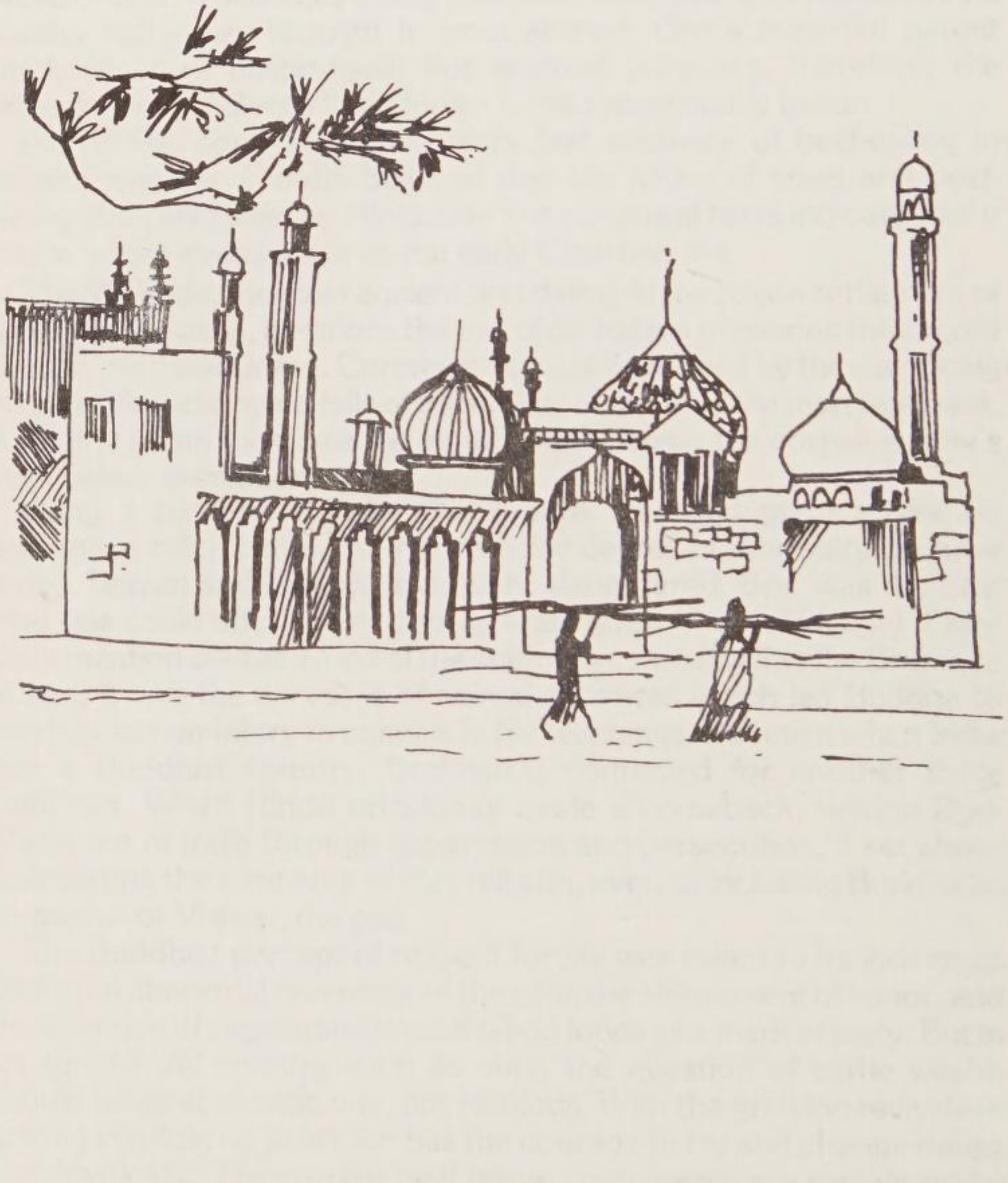
Efforts to improve stock by crossbreeding with imported cattle have also run into trouble, even though yields have increased and helped the small farmer. Whereas the tradition has been to venerate the humped breed of cow, it becomes a little awkward when she gets replaced by a smaller half-jersey brought in from abroad. One's maternal parent stock becomes bastardised! For spiritual purposes, therefore, the orthodox would like to keep Indian cows recognisably Indian.

For all the controversy, scholars find evidence of beef-eating in ancient writings. Gandhi believed that the killing of cows and beef-eating was prohibited by Hinduism, but scriptural texts indicate that it was in vogue even as late as the early Christian era.

The *Rig Veda*, the most ancient text dating to the Aryan settlement of the Gangetic plain, mentions the use of ox-hide in preparing the sacred ritual drink called *soma*. Certain gods were honoured by the sacrificing of cattle. A bridal hymn tells of the slaying of oxen for the marriage feast. A funeral hymn mentions the ritual of enveloping the corpse in cow's flesh before cremation.

Being a pastoral people, the Aryans also laid great stress on preserving milch cattle, but not with the degree of morbidity we have today. Barren and useless cows were slaughtered. Beef was the best food one could offer a very distinguished guest or a *rishi* (sage). Later texts mention beef as a food of the common man as well as the Brahmin. In fact, it was the excesses of animal sacrifices which led Buddha to emphasize non-injury to animals in his teachings. But even when India was a Buddhist country, beef-eating continued for another three centuries. When Hindu orthodoxy made a comeback, driving Buddhism out of India through suppression and persecution, it set about assimilating the remnants of that religion, even to including Buddha as an *avatar* of Vishnu, the god.

The Buddhist precept of respect for life was taken to its extremist limit in an abnormal reverence of the cow, the abjurement of liquor, and the adoption of vegetarianism and taboo foods as a mark of piety. But in an agricultural country such as ours, the question of cattle wealth should be an economic one, not religious. With the growing revivalism among Hindus, no politician has the courage to try and change things too drastically. The current beef tallow controversy is a sample of the kind of rigid mentality that bedevils the entire problem.



Fanaticism on Wheels

June 1984

We live in momentous times indeed! This morning, November 30, a brand new goddess rode past our front gate, mounted on a plywood float decorated with garlands. She sat astride a lion and was on her way, 1095 kilometers south, to Kanyakumari, or Cape Comorin, the southernmost tip of peninsula India. Accompanying her was another float on which was placed a large brass urn carrying 400 litres of sacred Ganges water. In the procession were jeeps and cars full of the faithful and an escort of motorcycle loonies waving saffron flags, wearing saffron kerchiefs, and shouting slogans. The entire circus was scheduled to complete its dash to the Cape by the auspicious date of December 16.

For a country which throws up godmen and godwomen, producing a full-fledged goddess poses no problem. Her name is Bharat Mata, or Mother India. There are no legends around her yet, but they will evolve with time, securing her a place in the Hindu pantheon of a few million deities. As a national symbol she will undoubtedly play the role of mother goddess.

Sita is said to have sprung from a furrow in the Earth; Athena sprang from the head of Zeus; Venus was born from the waves. Bharat Mata has no such fanciful notions around her origins. She has been born from political expediency. Her creators are taking a long view to the next general election within two years, and her job will be to rally the Hindu backlash for the rightist parties confronting Mrs. Gandhi's Congress.

But what should the mother goddess be doing traipsing round the countryside at top speed in recent weeks? The one which went past

here started from the pilgrim city of Hardwar in the Himalayan foothills. But even as one idol of the mother goddess travelled from north to south, another was crossing from east to west, and a third making its way to Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu. These processions are called *yatras*.

The entire garish parade is a campaign to draw all the Hindus in this country into one national fold. The organisers claim that only Hindus can be truly Indian. This is in keeping with orthodox belief that India ought to be declared a Hindu state and all non-Hindus given second-class status without voting rights.

However, national integration even in terms of a common religious tradition still appears elusive. It was therefore necessary to perform the rite of unity or integration — the *ekatmata yagna*. Behind it are eighty-five Hindu sects consisting of fifty-five *crore* Hindus (A *crore* equals ten million).

Searching for common bonds, the organizers decided that two symbols would be easily understood by all Hindus throughout the country. The first was the concept of a motherland personified by the mother goddess and the second, sacred Ganges water, which every Hindu reverences.

The fact that the mother goddess is such a latecomer is because of a defective history. The truth is that even in the ancient heyday of Hinduism, peninsula India was never a homogenous nation. The only time it appeared united was under British domination. A few hundred English troops in the eighteenth century were easily able to subjugate the country because of warring sub-nationalities. Today these sub-nationalities, despite their Hindu roots, still transcend national loyalties, and regional politics thrives on narrow parochialism which wants to exclude people coming from other regions with a different language and culture. These attitudes are reinforced by a subtle kind of racism, like the northern contempt of the south in the historical tradition of the ancient superior and fair Aryans looking down on the dark-skinned Dravidians.

Whether the mother goddess can cement all together with the help of Ganges water is a moot point. One doubts if the heaviest symbolism will unite a religion so fragmented by caste barriers, untouchability, ritual purity, mutual prejudice, and abhorrence. In fact, of the four reigning *shankaracharyas*, or high pontiffs of the faith, two have refused to give their blessings to the campaign and declare that they support untouchability and all the most retrograde aspects of the religion.

The three *yatras*, of processions, were launched on an auspicious

day, November 16. There were also eighty-nine sub-*yatras* covering smaller areas. The *yatra* heading for Rameshwaram was flagged off from Khatmandu by the king and queen of Nepal for the glory of Hinduism. A second set out from Gangasagar in coastal West Bengal and is heading for the Somnath Temple in Gujarat on the west coast. The third went through here from Hardwar to Cape Comorin. All the *yatras* expect to log more than 50,000 miles, stopping at hundreds and thousands of villages en route for Hindus to worship the mother goddess and the urns carrying the sacred water. In addition, the organizers are selling small plastic bottles (fifty cubic centimeters) of Ganges water for ten rupees (one dollar).

Because of Nagpur's strategic importance, we were able to witness the arrival and departure of the three main *yatras* which crossed each other here at the end of November. Nagpur is also the nerve centre of the organisation called the Rasthriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS), which was behind the assassination of Gandhi, and whose political philosophy is described by many as distinctly fascist. The RSS has set up the Hindu Vishva Parishad, World Hindu Council, for rousing the Hindu conscience. Needless to say, wherever the HVP has succeeded in doing so, there have been bloody communal riots between Hindus on one side and Christians, Muslims, and untouchables on the other.

The whole circus on wheels has therefore been watched with some nervousness by minority communities along the routes. Passing through minority areas as far apart as Assam and Kashmir, Hindu chauvinists traveling with the *yatras* have indulged in Muslim and Christian baiting in their speeches.

For the poor who cannot afford to pay ten rupees for the sacred water, other water is doled out from a tanker which is replenished by vessels drawn from sacred rivers in each region. So each tanker will end up with a potent mix of Ganges water and every other river in the country.

Nobody knows why the Ganges is given such importance in Hindu belief. The first Aryan settlers revered the Indus more. But today all Hindus worship the Ganges. As Ganga Mata (Mother Ganges) she washes away all sin. Even to take her name from a long way off atones for one's sins up to three previous existences. To have one's ashes strewn on her broad bosom after death takes one straight to heaven.

Great merit is accumulated if one carries away the water for future consumption and worship. Some devout Hindus will drink no other water but that drawn from the Ganges. Indian "scientists" testify to its remarkable shelf life of a year. A professor from McGill University is

quoted as having said

> A peculiar fact which has never been satisfactorily explained is the quick death, in three or five hours, of the cholera vibrio in the waters of the Ganges. When one remembers sewage by numerous corpses of natives, often cholera casualties, and by the bathing of thousands of natives, it seems remarkable that the belief of Hindus that the water of this river is pure and cannot be defiled and that they can safely drink it and bathe in it, should be confirmed by means of modern bacteriological research.

This claim is pure myth. What bacteriological research has established is that the Ganges is the most heavily polluted river we have. Industrial effluents, raw sewage, dead cattle, half-cremated corpses and disease and pestilence germs are responsible. A team of scientists travelled down the river and tested samples along the way. Their report was horrendous, but it didn't change a thing for the pious.

The belief persists that so miraculous are the properties of this water that the bones of the dead thrown into the stream dissolve in three days. Cholera is not carried by the river because it travels upstream each year, clearly proving that pilgrims and not the water spread the disease!

However, for the current exercise in hydropathy being staged by the Hindus through the *ekatmata yatras*, the plastic bottles of water have been drawn from the very source of the Ganges for the added magic. The river rises in the Himalayas at 12,770 feet from a cave at the foot of the Gangotri Glacier. The cave is called Gomukh or Cow's Mouth.

It is estimated that the three main yatras and countless smaller ones will cost the organisers Rs sixty *lakhs* (a *lakh* is one hundred thousand). But this six million rupees will be recovered from the sale of sacred water and bright-coloured prints of Bharat Mata. In all, the campaign will net them 2.5 *crores* (twenty-five million).

But whether it will fetch as many votes for the Hindu parties remains to be seen. The entire circus proves once more that the current upsurge in communalism in this country is not a religious, but a political phenomenon.

HOLY
ROSE
WATER
NEXT!

I Am God!

July 1984

Jesus has come! All good Christians can stop looking for the messiah, starting NOW! He is Indian, fifty-eight, hermaphroditic, and diabetic. He sports an immense golliwog wig which, he says, is his own hair with every filament standing upright from psychic energy, and his favourite pastime is conjuring, which includes healing diseases from any distance, producing holy ash out of the air, and coughing up small stone phalluses. Those who attended the Helsinki World Atheist Meet last year will remember the kind of magic B. Premanand demonstrated, and this is particularly used by our "messiah."

What proof has he of his divinity? He says he is mentioned in *Revelation 19*, which describes Christ riding out of heaven on a white horse, with eyes like flames of fire and a sword emerging from his mouth to smite the wicked nations of the world. "On his head were many crowns, and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood, etc." This, he claims, refers to his own saffron robe.

However, his horizons are wider than the original Jewish preacher. He also comes as a messiah for the Hindus — Kalki on a white horse, the tenth and final avatar of the god Vishnu, destined to descend to earth when all spiritual and social life has degenerated to its lowest. Kalki, too, will ride through the earth, holding aloft his fiery sword to destroy the wicked, renew creation, and initiate the *mahayug*, great age, equivalent of the Christian millenium.

There is much speculation about the actual physiology of this androgynous messiah, but since Indians still subscribe to the primitive

belief that deformity and physical defects are sometimes manifestations of divinity, he fits into the scheme of things. His devotees see him as a living incarnation of the half-and-half concept seen in the he-she images of Shiva, whose male nature is counterpoised with the one-breasted torso depicting the female principle of *shakti*, in the ultimate reconciliation of opposites.

Tal Brookes, an English seeker after "truth," traversed all of India until he found his spiritual guru at this godman's ashram in Bangalore. But then he discovered that, in addition to conjuring, the deity enjoyed debauching young white males among his foreign devotees. Shaken by his traumatic experience, Brookes returned home to write an indictment in a book called *Lord of the Air*, which he hoped would be a warning to other Christians who stray from the straight and narrow.

It isn't clear what impact this messiah has on Muslims despite his efforts to out-Mohammed the Prophet. He also claims to be the reincarnation of a famous Muslim saint of western India called Sai Baba of Shirdi. As this man's come-back, he calls himself Satya (true) Sai Baba. Inasmuch as good Muslims go straight to paradise to disport themselves with *houris*, it is a little puzzling as to how the soul of the original Sai Baba chose to return, and that, too, in the body of a Hindu *Kafir* (infidel).

Whereas the original saint was a true ascetic, this incarnation is among the most powerful of Indian godmen. Jurists, judges, politicians, eminent scientists, educationists, and businessmen are among his devotees, all overawed by his conjuring. His tentacles spread into many departments of government, as Premanand discovered when he tried to get a passport to travel abroad. He owns wealthy trusts, schools, ashrams, and an institution which is "deemed" a university (even though unrecognised officially) because it was inaugurated by an eminent woman member of our University Grants Commission who is a devotee. Since he is a religious institution, all his real estate, gold, jewels, and money go untaxed. His followers say of him "Baba is Jesus Christ who has come again, in the fullness of Christ, as Satya Bai Baba."

Indian godmen transformed by fate and fraud into multinational corporations are a twentieth century phenomenon. Christians might see it as the ultimate blasphemy for anyone to claim godhead, a sin for which Lucifer was thrown out of paradise (according to their religion). Indeed, the very term "godman" is a laughable contradiction. But to the Hindu mind there is no paradox whatsoever. A Hindu can with absolute sincerity say "I am god — *aham brahmasmi*" without falling in danger of hellfire. The late guru Muktananda said "Kneel to your own self.

Honour and worship your own being. Chant the mantra always going on within you. Meditate on your own self. God dwells within you."

The analogy in ancient scripture is of humans likened to myriads of earthen pots filled with water, each reflecting the blue entity of the sky. When death occurs, or a pot is shattered, the spirit or *atman* goes back to its source and merges again with the entity, Brahma. The notion of *atman* and Brahma — spirit and god — places godhead within the reach of anyone having the gall to carry it off successfully. After that all one needs to make a rich living is a horde of credulous followers.

Of Muktananda his disciples said he was Brahman because he created a new and wondrous world for his followers. He was Vishnu because he sustained and protected them in their divine life. He was Shiva because he annihilated their world of limited individuality. Therefore the best way to express their gratitude was to merge themselves in the pure consciousness wherein the guru abided. (If this reads like nonsense, it is!)

The attraction of Hinduism for westerners is because of its use of thought-magic and because it is gentler on the conscience than Christianity. Harrowing postures of guilt are not essential for salvation. And while sin is acknowledged, atonement is very simply achieved with a little bit of countermagic. Instant salvation is yours by merely taking the name of Hare Krishna. Instant nirvana is attainable by sitting around doing nothing in the name of TM.

It is more comfortable living with the suspicion that you yourself are an unrealized god than with the intimidating Christian vision of Big Brother watching you. It is also much less bothersome to say all religions are true as diverse paths leading to the same god. According to Hinduism, therefore, there is no false religion. But this is a superficial claim. Scratch a little deeper and you find that the Hindu is as convinced about the validity of his special dogma as is the Muslim, Christian, or Jew.

In any case it ought to be petty caviling about points of theology when we know that the cosmos is all *maya*, or illusion, and nothing is what it appears to be! Of course, this otherworldly stance prevents no one from making themselves stinking rich, by fair means or foul. India's godmen wear the saffron robes of renunciation, but control wealthy trusts, jet about in private planes, drive Rolls Royces, own prime pieces of real estate in Switzerland and other resorts, and wield considerable influence in our country's politics. But if all this appears paradoxical, it can be rationalised by the theory of karma, which simply can't be wrong if accumulated merit in some former life brings you into ownership of a

solid gold toilet seat in this one.

The crass vulgarity of it all ought to be our greatest shame, except that our godmen reflect a decadent milieu. I once had a woman argue with me that the Hare Krishna cult simply had to be true, "Look at how rich it is!"

But phony though these gods might seem, they are part of a hoary tradition in India. Even in ancient days they could be found in the remotest regions — ascetic, mystic or psychic, endowed with magical powers achieved by rigorous penance and self-torture, and amplified by myth and legend. Today, some of the more flamboyant ones can count Muslim, Christian, Parsi, Hindu, or whatever among their many followers, all convinced of their divinity and seeing no apparent conflict with their individual religious theology.

The eminence and notoriety achieved by some of these phonies dates to the years when hippie cults came East in search of nirvana. These children of the lost generation were ecstatic to find pot and venality freely available in ashrams under the guise of the religious experience.

Holy men — yogis, swamis, fakirs, pirs, rishis, maharishis, and babas — turn up in historical tales and legends. As men who had forsaken the world and sat apart from surging humanity, they allegedly acquired a profounder insight into the "Why?" of life. Devotees are urged to seek the holy guidance of these guru-gods because they can apply *gyan anjan*, or the ointment of divine knowledge, to one's eyes and open them to spiritual truths.

"Give your guru the honour due to god," advised Swami Lotus-feet, founder of the Hare Krishna cult. Rituals of worship are the same given to the gods. Trays of incense are waved before them, devotees fall flat on their faces and place offerings at their feet. They drink the water in which the guru's feet are washed — *charan-amrit* — foot ambrosia, it is called, a degree more imaginative than kissing the pope's big toe. Some devotees even eat *as-prasad* (holy food), the betelnut which has been chewed by their guru — not much different, perhaps, from the cannibalistic symbolism of the eucharist in which one ingests one's god for sympathetic magic.

Gita Mehta, in her book *Karma Kola*, tells of an English aristocrat who sought out a godman in the interior of Andhra Pradesh, remarkable not only for his enlightenment, but also for his urine which changed daily into scented rose water.

As a foreigner he was given a seat of honour outside the tent in which the godman relieved himself "of his first miraculous micturation." To his

surprise the crowd of devotees then began pushing him forward, and the guru himself put out a hand and beckoned to him.

Inside the tent the godman indicated the Englishman should have the honour of bearing the vessel to the devotees waiting outside.

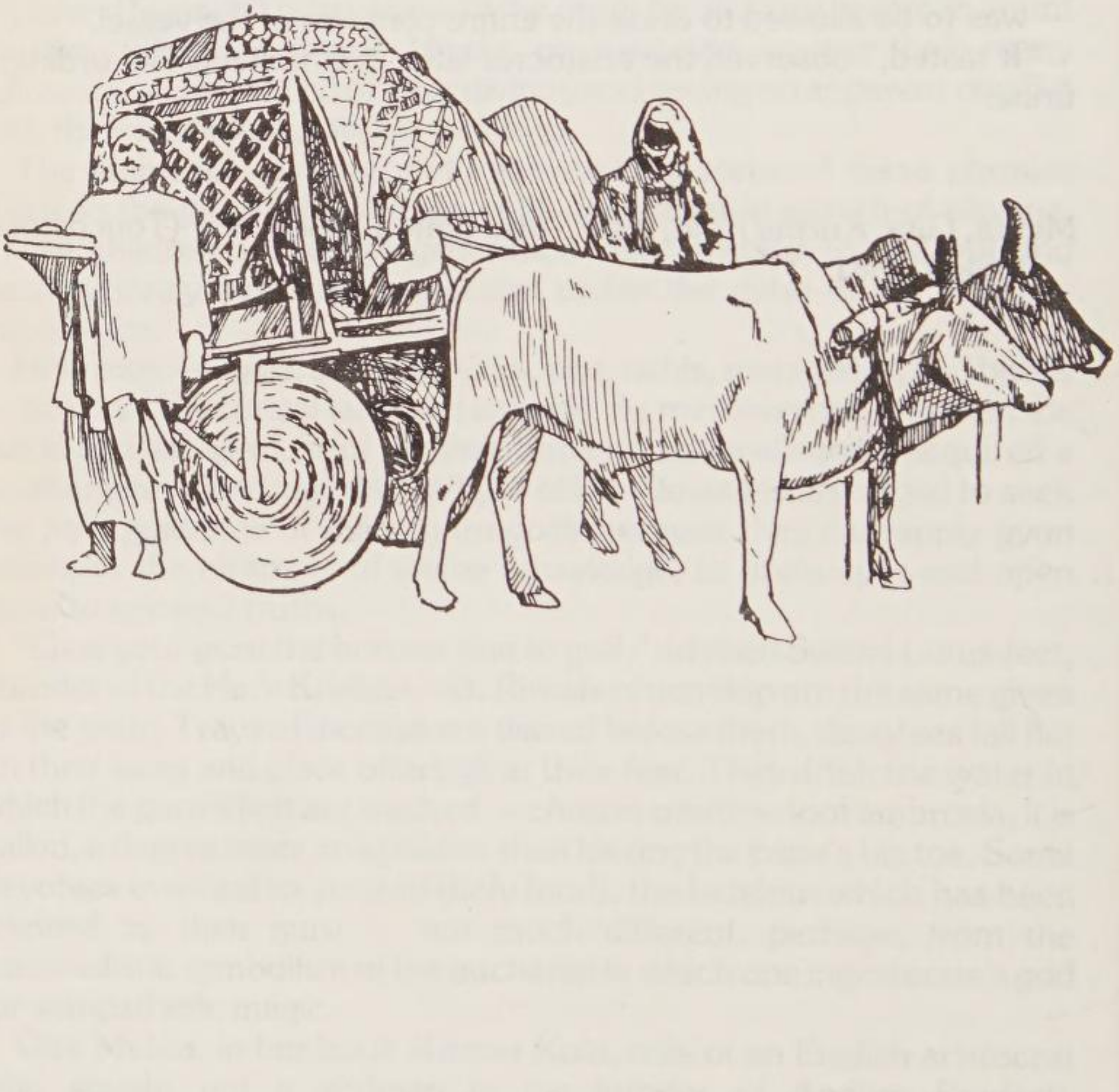
As the warm vessel was placed in his hands, he sniffed the contents.

"It smelled," he later remarked, "like ordinary urine."

The devotees cheered him when he appeared and signalled him urgently, encouraged by the godman's assistants. He soon gathered that he, an Englishman — "in a gesture of unprecedented magnanimity" — was to be allowed to drink the entire contents of the vessel.

"It tasted," observed the aristocrat later, "remarkably like ordinary urine."

Mehta, Gita. *Karma Kola*, New York: Simon & Schuster (Touchstone Books), 1981.



Women and The Law of Karma

August 1984

Since I was considering doing an article on the Hindu custom of *suttee* whereby a widow was burnt alive on the funeral pyre of her husband, I was particularly interested in Bergman's article "The influence of the religious belief in an afterlife on homicide." (*American Atheist*, January 1984). I doubt if there is any other society on earth where otherworld beliefs so drastically affect the quality of life as in India. I refer particularly to the Hindu law of karma, a belief so pervasive that many non-Hindus also subscribe to it.

Simply stated, this vedic belief is based on the immortality of the soul and its transmigration after death. It teaches that humans are reborn, some as humans, others as birds, beasts, or reptiles, depending on their good or bad actions in previous existences. The *Manu Samhita*, an ancient authoritative text on Hindu law, even lists the kind of sins which could decide one's future form. For stealing grain one might be born a rat. For stealing cloth, a partridge. But most Hindus prefer to believe that human souls are reborn Hindus with their entire status and material prosperity decided by the merit accumulated in former lives.

Of the law of karma, Jadunath Sinha said:

> Apart from its ontological difficulties, which are numerous, the law of karma degenerates into fatalism in the uneducated and unreflective person. Thus it comes to be misinterpreted as the negation of human freedom. It is confused with predestination. It undermines human initiative and incentive to action. It confuses morality with passive surrender to circumstances. It confounds

religion with absolute submission and resignation to over-mastering fate. This is the preservation of the law of karma as adumbrated in Indian thought. Originally it meant nothing more than the law of moral causation.

Indian Atheists are outspoken in their condemnation of the law of karma. Premnath Bazaz in *Secular Morality* describes it as an "enervating theory" which has been subtly used by higher castes to hold in abject misery millions of lower castes, untouchables, and women. They are persuaded that spiritual salvation lies in submitting without protest. This sanctioned defeatism accounts for their life-negating pessimism.

The belief in karma is undoubtedly responsible for our backward-ness, fatalism, superstition, and seeming inability to pull ourselves out of a moral morass. How can one's present condition be remedied if the solution is beyond reach in the unverifiable past? The best one can do is bear one's lot with patience and expect to enjoy the fruits of that patience in the next life.

Before proceeding, it might be worthwhile to look at some of the Hindu beliefs in an afterlife. If utterly virtuous, the soul is rewarded with *moksha*, or salvation. Its chain of existences finally broken, it returns to merge with the oversoul. If still found deficient in merit, it might return to human or animal form. Another belief claims the soul ascends into heaven or goes down to hell (a place even more vividly detailed than the Christian one). Finally, a soul may be condemned to return, but only as a ghost. But of all belief, the most common is that souls return in the form of humans.

In direct conflict with this popular belief is the theory that dead ancestors go to dwell in a region akin to Limbo or Hades. And to achieve that, families must perform compulsory rites of passage, with the provision of ritual food for sustenance made in offerings of *gram*, or flour balls with water. Shortly after death a feast is held, and families often go into debt to ensure that every detail of ceremony is carried out. Only male descendants can participate in these rituals, which is why it is obligatory for a Hindu householder to have a son, otherwise oblations to the manes will lapse. That this idea of a *pitri-loka* (world of manes) cancels out the belief in transmigration doesn't appear to bother anyone. I recall when our Hindu landlord in Bombay died suddenly; the family went to considerable expense and trouble feeding guests, providing meals to a brahmin, and even feeding the local milkman's cow. His daughter explained to me that even though he might have died

a good man worthy of salvation, one couldn't be sure how his karmic record stood. So they must carry out all the rituals to make sure he didn't return as a ghost and haunt them.

The law of karma not only justifies all suffering and injustice, it absolves people from feeling too much pity for the miseries of the less fortunate. Many thoughtful people are convinced it lies at the root of Indian callousness. Beliefs in an afterlife have also shaped many moral and social concepts. Nirad C. Chaudhuri in *Hinduism* writes of how child marriage was justified in the nineteenth century by the belief that one's ancestors reside in *pitri-loka*. "It was held that unless a girl was married before her first menstruation, the menstrual blood would go into the mouths of the departed ancestors."

Hindus constitute 85 percent of our population and many of their customs and traditions have found their way into other communities. Thus the family system which prevails is patriarchal and patrilineal. Sons are highly regarded, daughters are a liability, destined to drain away a man's hard earned money in dowry. According to the law of karma, marriage becomes a spiritual bond transcending all material considerations. A wife is socially conditioned to accept the unquestioned authority of her husband, regard him as a god, and serve as the guardian of his honour in the community. Ideally, she must be utterly loyal and devoted, subservient to her in-laws, steadfast even in adversity, always putting herself last in matters of material comfort. This stereotype is very popular in Indian films. Sexual inequality is institutionalized, and among the orthodox any woman who thinks in terms of autonomy is seen as wayward and possibly unchaste. If divorced, separated, or widowed, she suffers social stigma and is unwelcome even in her parent's home.

Not surprisingly among the cases of suicide by women, married ones outnumber the unmarried by ten to one. Domestic violence against women appears to be linked with a tradition of homicide. Almost daily our papers report deaths by burning of daughters-in-law in Hindu households where demands for more dowry were not met by their parents. In 1980 about three hundred married women committed suicide because of maltreatment and quarrels over dowry. But more ominously four hundred other cases reported to the police were ascribed to stove "accidents."

Since the marriage bond is supposed to transcend the present existence, it continues forever — for the woman. A man losing his wife wastes no time getting himself another.

The custom of child marriages continues in rural areas, despite the

law. Special fairs are held where babes in arms are united in wedlock, though they will not live together until they attain puberty. In a country where plague and pestilence often swept through the population in former times, hundreds of little girls were widowed. But remarriage was out of the question. Their bangles were broken, their hair shaved off, and their food reduced to one meal a day. They were regarded as inauspicious, denied access to the domestic hearth, and forced to pass their lives in self-denial, joylessness and rigorous piety. Thereby they added great merit to their husband's karmic balance sheet and ensured that their fidelity kept the marriage bond unbroken into subsequent existences. This was the reason why nineteenth century reformers met with such strong resistance when they tried to encourage the remarriage of child widows. Even today among certain classes the idea of widow remarriage is regarded with strong opprobrium.

The idea of the utterly faithful wife is exemplified in religious myths. The most popular is the legend of Shiva and his consort Sati (spelt thus to make a distinction between her and the practice of widow-burning, known in the West as *suttee*). The great goddess, Mahadevi, reflects Shiva's female aspect ranging from the gentlest to the most ferocious in Sati, Parvati, Durga, and finally Kali. Sati was utterly faithful to her lord and master, Shiva. When her father held a great sacrifice to which he failed to invite Shiva, she was so mortified by the dishonour done to him that she threw herself into the sacrificial fire and thus died. As the undisputed ideal of Hindu womanhood, a similar rite was carried out for centuries in her name through the practice of *suttee*.

The custom probably flourished in earliest times, though the first recorded case was in A.D. 510. It later became well-entrenched, particularly among the *kshatrya*, or warrior castes, where mortality rates among males were higher because of endless intertribal conflict. In Rajasthan, famous for its military tradition since it bore the brunt of all invasions of the peninsula from the north, there was another variation of this morbid rite known as *jauhar*. When the Rajputs saw that a battle was indeed lost, they chose death to dishonour. Donning saffron robes, they emerged on the battlefield to die, sword in hand. Meanwhile, in the fortress, their womenfolk prepared an immense pyre and committed collective suicide by jumping into the flames dressed in bridal finery.

The practice of *suttee*, however, was more widespread in the rest of the country. Hindu law codes upheld the custom as highly laudable and worthy of merit. It was a matter of prestige when a prince died to have his wives, concubines, and female slaves burnt alive with his body. In the independent Sikh kingdom of the eighteenth century, one such

prince had three hundred immolated with him.

A famous Brahmin historian of the twelth century, Kalhana, describes with obvious approval cases of *suttee* in Kashmir. But a more modern historian noted that in Calcutta and its neighborhood in three years there were 253, 289, and 441 cases. And this was in 1815, 1816 and 1817 — when the British had already begun to establish themselves in India.

We will never know how many of these cases were voluntary. But girls were so strongly conditioned in placing family honour above all else, and so convinced that the act was religiously sanctioned that many probably went willingly.

The abolition of *suttee* was brought about by a nineteenth century Hindu reformer from Bengal, Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833). His repugnance of this primitive and cruel rite dated to the time when as an impressionable boy he saw his dead brother's young widow dragged to the funeral pyre against her will. Her anguish and agony remained with him, and he resolved to fight the kind of religious orthodoxy which sanctioned such inhumanity. He later extended his reformer's zeal to attack idol worship, polygamy, the caste system, and the denial of remarriage to Hindu widows.

It was largely through his efforts that the British government made *suttee* a crime by an act of Parliament in 1829. Anyone assisting a widow in burning herself on her husband's pyre was held guilty of culpable homicide. Anyone using violence to force her to the act was sentenced to death. The act not only prohibited immolation, but also the burial of widows with their dead husbands — a custom prevalent in some parts of Bengal.

The law was vigorously resisted by orthodox Hindus who denounced it as blatant interference of their religion by the British. In 1830 they presented a petition to the Privy Council in England, but Roy travelled to London to present a counterpetition to the British Parliament.

Today *suttee* is no longer practiced, but the superstitious hold of the rite continues. One sometimes reads a news story of a case occurring in some remote and backward rural area. Interestingly, all have certain similar features: One, the police always arrest and charge members of the victim's own family, village elders or priests; two, none of the crowd of witnesses to the ghastly incident makes any effort to rescue the hapless victim. Instead, all are stirred into a religious frenzy and raise cries of "*Sati Mata ki jai*!" (Praise to Mother Sati!); three, the site of the immolation immediately becomes a shrine where devotees flock to pray for favours and make offerings. And finally, it is found that the ones who

stand to gain most are the ones who urged or forced the widow to burn herself. There is much money for them in the commercialization of this personal tragedy.

I have before me an account of a *suttee* which took place close by here in the neighboring state of Madhya Pradesh two years ago. Sandel village with its 970 inhabitants is one of the most backward in the state. Here lived fifty year-old Duvasi Bai, whose husband died after twenty years as a consumptive. When the body was taken away by the men for cremation, Duvasi Bai suddenly appeared at the site, dressed in bridal finery. She quietly circled the pyre with her head bowed and then climbed on it to cradle her husband's head in her lap. The men immediately raised the cry of "*Sati Mata ki jai*!" and watched her burn. They later told the police that nobody forced her to it.

The news of the immolation spread to other villages, and people came flocking to offer flowers, garlands, and coconuts on the spot. The police arrested the woman's four brothers who protested that they had in fact tried to dissuade her.

None of the crowd displayed any remorse. In fact, some went about with a loudspeaker lauding the feat. The villagers themselves were full of admiration. "She has brought honour to our village," they said. "Why should we not appreciate her action?"

Her old mother was extremely proud of her. "Why have they put my sons in jail?" she demanded. "Who can prevent the will of Sati Mata?"

Duvasi Bai's daughter in her turn provided a clue to the kind of benighted thinking which is behind such ghastly religious belief. She was also very proud of her mother, she declared. She said her mother had constantly instructed her never to forget that for a married woman there is no other god but her husband, and a faithful wife must be prepared to live and die for him.

Bazaz, Premnath. *Secular Morality*. New York: Vantage Press, 1978.
Chaudhuri, Nirad C. *Hinduism: A Religion to Live by*. London, England: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Towards National Integration

September 1984

In January of this year top government officials, political leaders of all hues, chief ministers of the states, and representatives from industry met in conclave in New Delhi for a meeting of the National Integration Council. Most Indians are unaware that such a body even exists, though this was the second time it met after November 1980.

At the first marathon meeting, which lasted nine hours, these very important people indulged in a great deal of pontification about how vital it has now become that we think of ourselves first as Indians and only after that as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, and whatever else.

Or again, first as Indians and only then as Brahmin, Kshatrya, Vaishya, Shudra, Harijan, or a few thousand other castes and subcastes.

Or again, first as Indians and then as Punjabi, Tamilian, Bengali, Assamese, Kashmiri, Gujarati, Bihari, and so on to a further few, hundred regional ethnic groups and subnationalities.

Or yet again, as Indians with our first loyalty to the national language of Hindi and only after that to our individual languages of Punjabi, Tamil, Bengali, Assamese, Gujarati, Marathi, and so on to countless other languages, dialects, and subdialects.

This enumeration of communities, castes, regional groups, and regional languages is to give you some idea of how mind-boggling our predicament is. I doubt if you will find many genuine Indians throughout the length and breadth of this country. We are in a well-defined minority.

The second meeting of the National Integration Council, therefore, was to impress on people the need for a vigorous intellectual and moral campaign against communalism, casteism, regionalism, and linguistic fanaticism. The delegates also discussed the role of the press and radio in promoting national integration.

A list of dos and don'ts was drawn up which makes amusing reading to Atheists who aren't infected by naiveté:

DOS

a. Speak kindly and appreciatively of the common points of the various religions and the features which unite all Indians.

b. Mix with people of different persuasion and visit their religious places if there is no objection, and, if not objected to, on social and other occasions, too.

c. Articulate the contribution of poets, authors and playwrights of other religions and languages to the unity of India.

d. Condemn writings that are scurrilous and likely to wound the religious feelings of others. Strengthen the hands of local government functionaries in their efforts to promote the communal harmony.

DON'TS

a. Do not criticise or belittle or ridicule the tenets and observances of other religions.

b. Do not use loudspeakers and amplifiers in public places, especially in places of worship, in such a way as to cause nuisance to others and in particular not to hurt the religious feelings of other communities.

As part of the Council's countrywide effort to promote the concept of Indianness, all school texts have been scrutinised and sanitised of material which might contaminate the minds of the young with communal hatred and prejudice. Recalling my own experience as a primary school teacher, I feel somewhat skeptical about this exercise. I have heard five-year olds candidly expressing hatred and contempt of other religions and castes with an adult perception they could only have acquired at their mother's knees. The roots of communal prejudice are pernicious and go deep into our historical past.

It is doubtful whether any of the weighty topics debated at the top-level meeting of the National Integration Council will ever filter down to the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker in our teeming bazaars. They have no illusions about the system in which they fight for

survival and know where their loyalties lie in any communal flare-up.

The truth is that very few of the participants who sat together at this conclave have clean hands themselves. Beginning with Mrs. Gandhi, every politician exploits religious sentiment, caste loyalties, regional interests, and linguistic fanaticism if it brings in their votes. Every political party has, at some time or other, forged electoral alliances with religious-based groups, with leftists and rightists, and campaigned by appealing to bigotry, prejudice, and hatred. They have done this from the time we gained our freedom in 1947. Now the birds are coming home to roost.

Until recently Mrs. Gandhi was seen as the savior of the minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. But a certain disenchantment has now set in. She has turned pious. She claimed she was an Atheist when interviewed by a foreign journalist. Now she explains away her piety by saying it is a political thing! This kind of cynicism is what has set people at each other's throats today.

Mrs. Gandhi now makes frequent visits to hindu shrines, places of pilgrimage, the ashrams of godmen, and venerates godmen, including Jesus Christ superstar, the Satya Sai Baba. According to a news report in 1980, when she moved back into her official residence as prime minister, she had the place purified by rituals carried out by Brahmin priests summoned from Benares (Varanasi). We are told she frequently consults astrologers before launching an important undertaking. Militant Hindu sentiment is less antagonistic to her now, and in certain regions the dividing line between fascist Hindu organizations and her partymen is very thin indeed.

Her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, was an Atheist and once wrote

> The spectacle of what is called religion in India and elsewhere has filled me with horror, and I have frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seems to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation, and the preservation of vested interest.

He was also aware that "the real struggle today in India is not between Hindu and Muslim culture, but between these two and the conquering scientific culture of modern civilization."

With obscurantism now joined with power politics, those of us who remember the first years of freedom see a steady erosion of secular values and a steady regression in terms of true tolerance. Today India is more petrified and divided by fossilized beliefs, split in every direction

by caste, insulated by subsects, blinded by obsolete beliefs, and paralysed by a fatalism which sees hope only in the next world.

As the dominating religion of the majority, Hinduism pervades every aspect of government. No major project is launched without a minister performing a special *puja* guided by a Hindu priest. In every public office Hindu icons and prints of deities, godmen, saints, and babas are hung on walls. Some government departments do not start work until a *puja* is performed with all employees in attendance. Coconuts are broken even against the hulls of ships or newly acquired jumbo jets for the domestic airline to the chanting of obscure Vedic mantras two thousand years old. It is hardly surprising that the reaction to all this has been a kind of communal backlash, with other religious groups drawing together more tightly within themselves for fear that they will lose their socioreligious identity by a slow process of Hinduisation.

On the other hand, protest is tantamount to downright bad manners. One is expected to participate without murmur in all such Hindu functions, no matter what one's religious commitment. The notion that religion must be absolutely excluded from the temporal and confined within the limits of the private conscience is something which few Indians seem able to comprehend. Religiosity is blatantly rampant wherever one turns. When the present Sikh president of India was sworn into office, he made it a point to visit a temple, church, mosque, and *gurdwara* to prove how secular he is. It missed most people's imaginations that had he been truly secular, as head of a secular state he wouldn't have visited any place of worship at all.

Historically religion has always confounded any effort at peaceful coexistence. Gandhi's mass movement for freedom from British colonialism was actually a religious revival. He couldn't have stirred the masses had he gone to them in the suit and bowler hat he wore while studying law in England and again while practising in South Africa. The loincloth of the holy man and the Hindu appellation of "Mahatma" carried him far. Not surprisingly, Muslims began to feel insecure, convinced there would be no place for them in Gandhi's free India. For him politics was the handmaid of religion. And the otherwise liberal-minded Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, in turn made religion the handmaid of politics.

The dos and don'ts of the National Integration Council harp on Gandhi's own belief that all religions preach love and brotherhood — if only their adherents would exercise restraint and practise their precepts faithfully. But religion itself is a totalitarian ideology. Each group claims a patent on truth and regards the rest as aberrations of its

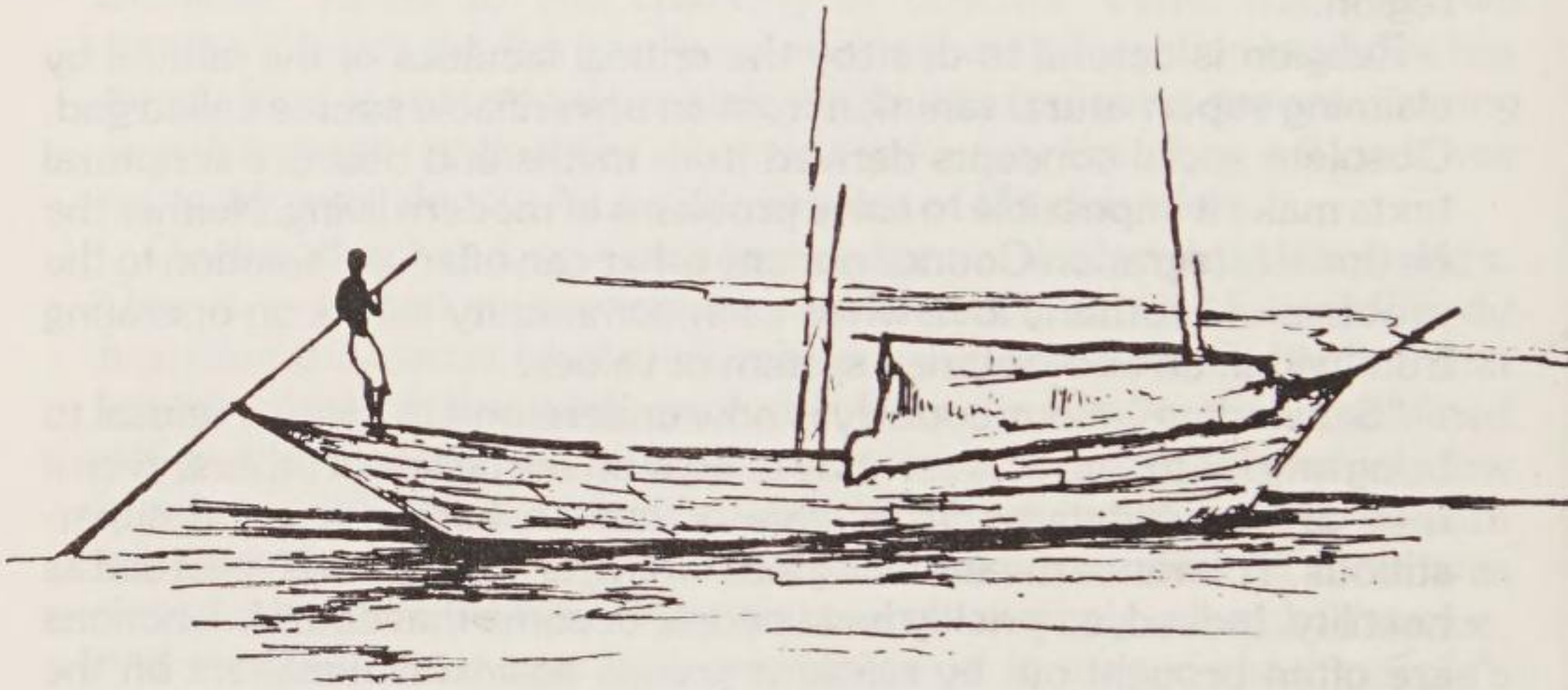
own truth. Religion also unites people into isolated groups who are brought up to believe that they must not compromise their faith by theological dilution of any sort.

In our secular state of India today we have democratic electorates operating on communal lines. Caste and community play a significant role in deciding on party candidates in any constituency. Adult franchise is used to perpetuate and strengthen caste distinctions. Block voting has transformed most of our constituencies into vast communal complexes where die-hard attitudes decide the political color of each region.

Religion is careful to destroy the critical faculties of the faithful by claiming supernatural sanction from an unverifiable source called god. Obsolete social concepts derived from myths and obscure scriptural texts make it impossible to solve problems of modern living. Neither the National Integration Council nor any other can offer us a solution to the problem of brotherly love when each community insists on operating from within an authoritarian system of values.

"Secularism" in our country is now understood to mean a refusal to bring any kind of critical scrutiny to bear on the beliefs of others, even if they are exploitative, destructive of human happiness, and superstitious. Tolerance means being indifferent, and criticism is regarded as hostility. Indeed, so prickly have people become that court injunctions are often brought out by religious groups against film-makers on the accusation that the theme of a film, a song, or even a passing reference in the dialogue hurts their religious feelings.

One of the emptier slogans is "Unity in Diversity." But diversity is steadily swamping out the unity. There doesn't seem to be much hope of stemming the rot until and unless people are educated into abandoning their parochialism. They must stop confusing culture with religion and instead work together towards developing a new Indian identity based on reason, compassion, and humanism.



Confusion Confounded

October 1984

Some of the headlines in our papers probably make strange reading to foreigners — "Sikhs demand own Personal Law," "Christians plead for realistic divorce law," "Muslim women demand a uniform civil code," "High Court strikes down Hindu law for the restitution of conjugal rights."

According to the constitution, ours is a "secular" state, though what that really means nobody seems so sure anymore. Nevertheless, we have a chapter of Directive Principles laying down guidelines for legislation which will further the welfare of citizens. Article 44 directs the state "to endeavor to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India." But the men who framed our constitution were of a different breed than those who followed. For fear of a communal backlash and the loss of a considerable chunk of votes from minority communities, no government has done anything about this particular article.

Recently, rationalist and secular groups launched a signature campaign urging the government to implement Article 44. They also hope to introduce a bill in parliament which may not ever be passed, but which will initiate a public debate on the question.

The feeling among intellectuals is that out-dated religious laws regarding marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance, and illegitimacy should be replaced by more humane ones, and secular concepts should supercede antiquated holy writ in keeping with the times.

Their other hope is that a uniform civil code will bring down barriers between communities and break into the siege mentality of those

closed groups who think that the smallest concession made to reformists will destroy their religious identity. The outcome will be greater homogeneousness towards achieving that ideal condition which still continues to elude us even after thirty-six years of independence — national integration.

As it happens we already have a uniform criminal code left us by the British. Under this, malefactors are charged, tried, sentenced, and sometimes executed without reference to any religious tradition. This is why you never read of Indian Muslims having their hands chopped off for theft, being stoned for adultery, or publicly lashed for drinking — as it is happening in Pakistan today, where Islamic laws are observed. Jinnah, the founder of that state would have been appalled, for he was a liberal-minded Muslim and had spoken in favour of a uniform civil code before the country was partitioned.

The orthodox are strongly opposed to the concept of a uniform civil code, because they see it as a threat to their religio-cultural identity. The Muslims particularly fear a slow Hinduisation of their traditions which will destroy their distinctness. On the other hand there are enlightened scholars among them who quote chapter and verse from the Koran to prove the Prophet never intended these laws to be immutable. Change was permissable if the pupose was in the best interests of the faithful.

Invaders from the north brought Islam into the Indian peninsula, and before the British came, legal systems were based broadly on Hindu and Muslim tenets. The *shariat*, or Muslim law, was followed in criminal, civil, and commercial areas by Muslims. And under Hindu scriptural traditions commercial transactions, family relations, inheritance and property rights were ensured.

In an effort to try and introduce some semblance of order, the British gradually introduced changes which were to cover all their Indian subjects without any reference to religion. These new laws were in the Indian Penal Code, the Criminal Procedural Code, the Evidence Act, and the Civil Procedural Code. However, none of these touched on personal religious laws. After Partition in 1947, when our constitution was being framed, the constituent assembly debated the question of a common civil code and its enactment as a Directive Principle of state policy. It was strongly opposed by Muslims. They argued that what the British couldn't do in 175 years, and what the Muslims had refrained from doing in 500 years, should not be given to the modern Indian state to do all at once.

To give you some idea of some of the personal laws which prevail I am giving a few random samples:

Under Muslim law divorce is of three kinds. First, there is *talaaq* — in which a husband merely pronounces the word *talaaq* (I divorce thee) three times at his will and without the intervention of a court. He can also obtain a written document called a *talaaqnama*. Second, there is divorce by mutual consent. Third, there is a route through judicial pronouncement by a court according to an act of 1939.

Under Christian law, proven adultery is the only legal ground for divorce. This is under the antiquated Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1892. While Christians can get a divorce through a civil suit, the Roman Catholic Church refuses to recognise its validity. On the other hand, the courts do not recognise a church annulment. It often happens that a man caught in this crossfire, but keen to marry again, converts to Islam and, taking advantage of the Muslim practice of allowing up to four wives, achieves his end. He turns polygamist to evade arrest as a bigamist!

Interestingly, courts in the former territories of Goa, Doman, and Diu follow a Portuguese law of 1911 by which annulments granted by the church are registered and recognised as legal by civil courts. But in the rest of India the 1869 divorce law prevails. A man can petition for divorce only if his wife is guilty of adultery. But the wife on her part must proffer two grounds for divorce, of which one *must* be adultery.

Some time ago a seminar was held in Bombay under Roman Catholic patronage to discuss "Ecclesiastical annulment of marriage and the Indian statute affecting the Christian community." Speakers were both Protestant and Roman Catholic, but organizers took care to see that the final authority of the church was not challenged. One monsignor took pains to clarify the distinction between annulment and dissolution, with the latter only possible by sanction from the Vatican. In February of this year a group of Christians, Roman Catholics and Protestants, submitted a petition to the ministry for a law demanding the repeal of the Indian Divorce Act of 1869 and the Indian Christian Marriage Act, 1892. They want them replaced with an enlightened law framed in 1962, but never passed by parliament, which will enable Christians to avoid the ordeal of approaching both ecclesiatical and civil courts.

Among Parsis, divorces are negotiated by a special matrimonial court. Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains are all subject to Hindu law, but the Sikhs agitating for a separate state in Punjab now want that particular article of the constitution changed. They also want their own personal law, a draft of which was published last year. If adopted, it will set their women back into medieval times regarding inheritance and property rights and ensure that more daughters-in-law are burnt to death.

In broken marriages children are seen as spoils of battle between warring parties. As this is a patrilineal society, paternity is more important than maternity, though unmarried mothers may give their names to their offspring and allow inheritance. Both Hindu and Muslim law vest guardianship in the father rather than the mother. But if she is judged a women of proven virtue, she is granted custody of the children until they become majors, with maintenance provided by the father.

In cases of illegitimacy under Hindu law a Hindu male or female is bound to maintain his/her illegitimate child. But the right of inheritance is denied, though the offspring can claim maintenance in turn from the parents' heirs.

Muslim law gives no right of maintenance by a father to illegitimate offspring, nor a share of his estate when he dies. But among *Sunni* Muslims such a child is entitled to be maintained by its mother, and rights of inheritance are recognised.

Christian and Parsi laws do not grant any rights to an illegitimate child by his/her parents. But such children can inherit if specifically mentioned in a will. Then a Muslim, according to Koranic law, cannot bequeath more than one-third even if he desires otherwise.

Personal laws of most communities have come between a sane and compassionate law of adoption. I wrote about this in the January 1983 issue of the *American Atheist*, "Where Religion Denies Children Happiness."

One last example which caused some sensation in the middle of last year was when the High Court of the state of Andhra Pradesh struck down a clause in the Hindu law for restitution of conjugal rights. The judge called it "a savage and barbarous remedy violating the right to privacy and human dignity guaranteed by *Article 21* of the Constitution."

What was this right? Under *Section 9* of the Hindu Marriages Act it is possible for a husband (or wife) to regain conjugal rights by a court decree. If the unwilling party fails to comply, his/her property can be attached or sold under the Civil Procedure Code.

The case concerned a young south Indian cinema star who has become a wealthy celebrity from the time she married a simple farmer in 1975. Nearly five years later, after they had separated, he moved a court under *Section 9* for purposes of having a child by her. The judge, somewhat carried away by his own rhetoric, denounced the section as

> the grossest form of violation of an individual's right to privacy, it deprived a woman of control over her choices as to when and how

and by whom the various parts of her body should be allowed to be sensed, and takes away her autonomy or control over the intimacies of personal identity. Nothing can conceivably be more degrading to human dignity than to subject a person by the long arm of the law to a positive sex act.

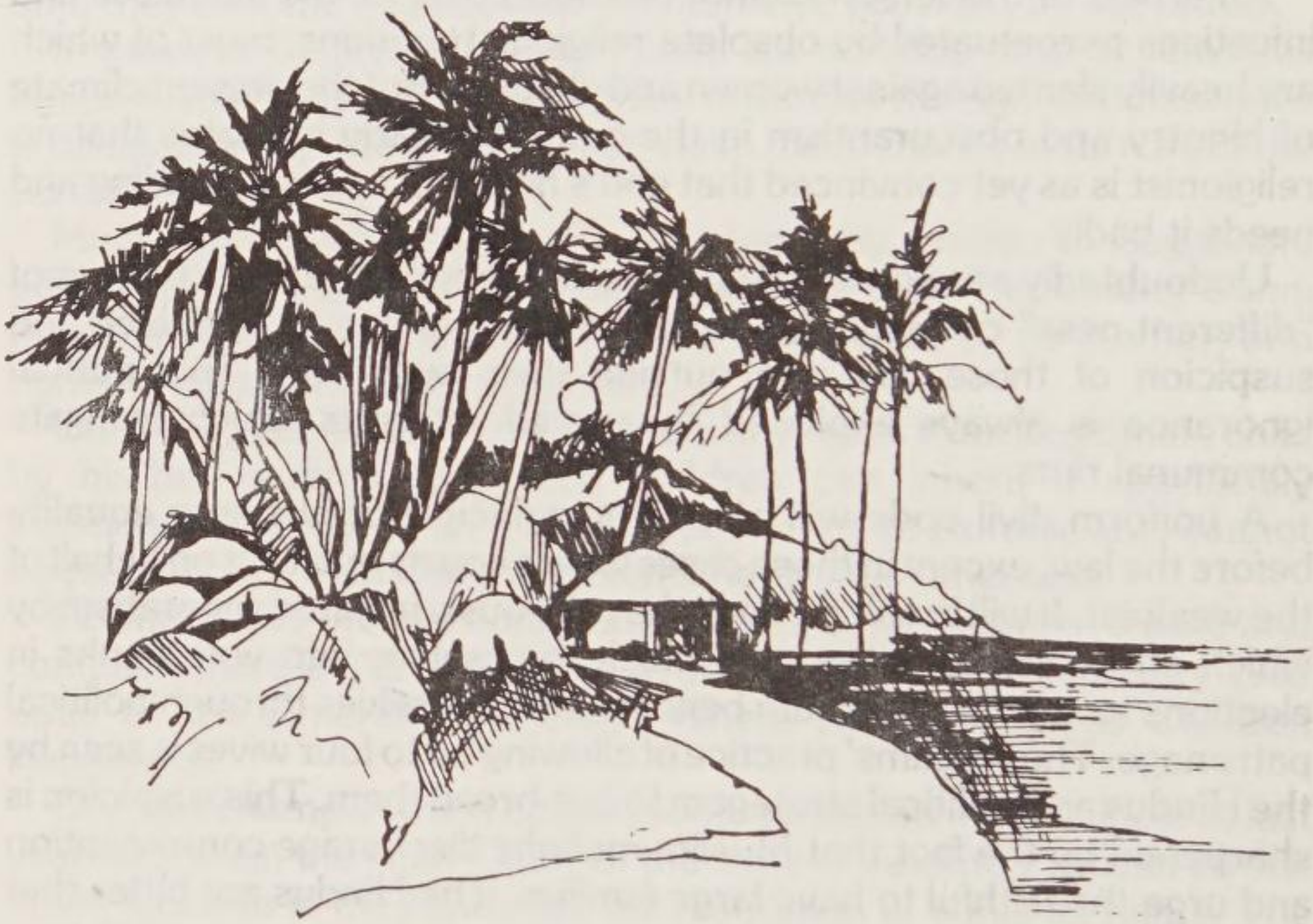
An article of this length cannot possibly cover all the inequities and injustices perpetuated by obsolete religious traditions, most of which are heavily slanted against women and children. But the present climate of bigotry and obscurantism in the country clearly indicates that no religionist is as yet convinced that god's holy writ needs amending and needs it badly.

Undoubtedly a uniform civil code would disperse the acute feelings of "different-ness" communities suffer which give rise to prejudice and suspicion of those who are outside their own faith. This mutual ignorance is always exploited by vested interests which instigate communal riots.

A uniform civil code will affirm the principle of absolute equality before the law, except in those cases where courts must act on behalf of the weakest. It will break through the religiously inspired separatism by which entire communities now block themselves into vote banks in elections to secure maximum benefits for themselves through political patronage. The Muslims' practice of allowing up to four wives is seen by the Hindus as a political stratagem to out-breed them. This suspicion is sharpened by the fact that Muslim *mullahs* discourage contraception and urge the faithful to have large families. The Hindus are bitter that they allowed a partition of the country once to accommodate a dominantly Muslim state like Pakistan. They are unprepared to allow any further vivisection of the country. The Hindus also regard the ties of the Roman Catholic Church with the Vatican in matters of ecclesiastical law as tantamount to an extraterritorial loyalty.

A uniform civil code could achieve much, the most important being an affirmation of the principle of secularity enshrined in our constitution.

Bhatty, Margaret. "Where Religion Denies Children Happiness." In the *American Atheist*, edited by Madalyn O'Hair. January 1983, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 30-32. Austin, Tx: American Atheist Press.



Waiting for The Messiah

November 1984

Some time ago the Nagpur Atheist Association organized a series of public lectures. Among the speakers invited was the well-known Marxist scholar Ashgar Ali Engineer. His subject was the problem of communalism in our country, and he gave an incisive analysis of Hindu-Muslim riots where religion is used as a front for economic and political power games. I'd comment on this thesis here but for a startling development. While in Cairo, at the end of March, to attend a conference on Palestine, Mr. Engineer was brutally beaten, in the Jamia Anwar mosque, by a large group of the Muslim sect from which he comes. His companion, a member of parliament, quickly brought the police to his rescue. The attackers explained they had merely roughed him up because he had blasphemed the Prophet. But he knew from their threats when they assaulted him that this was in retaliation for an article he had published in a Bombay weekly. Titled "Godfather II," it was an open attack on the religious head of their sect. Flown back to India, Engineer was put under intensive care; his back injured, and his vision severely impaired.

This is not the first time Engineer has been attacked. At a press conference in Calcutta he was manhandled by hired goons. Invited to read a paper at a literary seminar in Hyderabad, a man tried to slash his face with a razor. The hotel where he was staying was invaded by hoodlums who beat him up. Threatening calls were made to the manager to evict him. The police were summoned to protect the premises.

Last November a smear campaign was launched in Bombay accusing

him of having raped a certain prostitute who had jumped from a five-star hotel to escape her Arab tormentor. After he returned from Cairo, Engineer received phone calls threatening him with death for selling Hindu girls to Muslim sheikhdoms. The police commissioner advised him to get a gun for protection.

Who is his enemy? And why is he being made a target?

Ashgar Ali Engineer comes from a small Muslim sect called the Dawoodi Bohras of which there are a million in all. Of these, sixty percent live in India and the rest the world over, engaged chiefly in business and trade. Because of their industry they are more affluent than other Muslim sects. But they are all held in thrall by a priestly hierarchy headed by a pontiff whom our press, with unintended humour, describes as "The Holy Terror."

Engineer is the rarest of his kind, a breed which can be counted on the fingers of one hand in this country — he is a reformer. But unlike the majority of our religious heavyweights he acts on his convictions. As a rebel he confronts the establishment with only a small following as yet. But of late more members of the Bohra sect are beginning to support him.

"The only difference between the Roman Catholic Church and the Bohra community," he says, "is that the Church has given up its medieval practices but the Bohras have not."

The analogy is very apt. At the top is the Syedna or Dai, the fifty-third in a long line. Up to 134 years ago the pontiff was chosen from among the wisest of the sect. But after the forty-seventh Syedna, the office became a family tradition. The present Syedna is seventy one years old, titled the Sultan of the Bohras, with more than 200 members of his family called princes and princesses each with a subsidy of four thousand rupees a month, furnished flats, chauffeur-driven cars, a central kitchen, many servants, and large chunks of taxes wrung from the followers in the name of their god.

The Syedna is easily among the richest men in the country. But being a religious institution, most of his wealth goes untaxed. The Bohras believe that he holds office on behalf of a messiah who is always on earth and will one day reveal himself. This is the Imam Maulana Tyeb who, 800 years ago, went into seclusion when he was six years old. He will emerge one day and name a successor to the imamship, but until then the Syedna and his descendants will hold in trust all the accumulated wealth of centuries.

The Bohra Vatican is called Saifi Mansion, a magnificent building on Malabar Hill in Bombay. There are three buildings in fact, spread over

twenty acres, with enough space for 180 members of the family. Here the faithful come on pilgrimage from all over, as many as 500 every day, to seek audience with Syedna. Each must bring an offering of money.

The pontiff is regarded with great awe and dread. Women ascribe him with magical powers. A mother who remained childless for eleven years after her son was born finally conceived twins. She was convinced this miracle had been granted by the Syedna. A Bohra girl who topped in Poona University told reporters it was because of the Syedna's blessings. The Syedna even has powers extending beyond the grave. The dead have a letter from him to his brother Gabriel tied around their necks. Without this letter the two angels, who visit a dead person in the grave, will chop him into pieces on the basis of his sins. But when they see the letter they know he comes with the goodwill of the Syedna, and he is admitted into paradise. An indulgence of this kind costs a poor man 140 rupees and a rich man ten times as much.

Like the Roman Catholic Church, the hierarchy of priests is not above thinking up miraculous happenings to overawe their credulous followers. A showpiece for tourists to Bombay is a gigantic white mausoleum of marble in which the father of the present Syedna lies buried. The Koran is inscribed on its four walls in gold, the first line of each chapter studded with diamonds, emeralds, pearls, and rubies. Around this fabulous tomb live thousands of Bohras in ruined tenements which are likely to be demolished to make place for gardens. Some years ago, when I lived in Bombay, there was considerable sensation when teardrops were discovered by the custodians dotting the marble walls. Bohras flocked in numbers to witness this miracle, and the hysteria was astonishing. The priesthood interpreted these "tears" as the former Syedna's grief over the growing sin among his followers and the rifts created by them in the community.

His holiness the Syedna has a vast staff of priests and agents to carry out his orders. In addition, like the Roman Catholic Inquisition, there are informers placed within scattered communities. Called *shabbab* for the men and *bunayyat* for the women, these secret agents report the slightest hint of heresy. Errant Bohras are subject to persecution by the Inquisition. The repentant ones confess their sins in public, entering a place of worship barefooted and loudly proclaiming their guilt, while the faithful hurl abuses and spit on them.

This vast network of control operates even in distant countries. Every aspect of a Bohra's life is supervised and controlled by the priestly class. Among the seven kinds of tax levied by the Syedna, one is a tax on the foetus in the womb (since it is conceived by his grace). Another

tax is levied on the dead, since they are obliged to him for recommending them for salvation.

Like the pope, the Syedna is also infallible. As the sole representative of god on earth he is not accountable to the law of the land. He has absolute control and power over the lives and property of his followers. No Bohra who offends him can enter paradise. A marriage solemnized without his permission or blessing is not valid, and all the issue are illegitimate. He can raise or lower the status of any Bohras and order the entire community to ostracize and boycott them without any reference to the principles of natural justice.

On attaining puberty, every Bohra youth takes an oath surrendering his will to the Syedna. Defaulters to this oath can have their property looted and burnt by the others; even their wives can be taken away. Several women, whose husbands have joined the reformist movement, have been forced to divorce them. In Bombay a son who refused to submit to priestly tyranny saw the body of his recently buried mother dug up and thrown on the pavement outside the Bohra cemetery. A Bohra newsman with progressive ideas was severly beaten, and his face was scarred with acid. He was finally burnt to death in Pakistan. Reformers have been harassed, assaulted, and ostracised. One businessman saw his entire staff walk out of his firm, never to return.

Bohra girls must also submit to a rite which renders them *dasi* (slave) and gives the Syedna complete control over their lives. When a few weeks old, they are secretly circumcised to curb their sexuality.

During the freedom movement the Bohras did not identify with the mainstream. They remained aloof and exclusive in their ghettoes. But with the spread of education many are now acutely aware of how the priesthood exploits them and extorts obedience and money. They cannnot exercise their right to freedom of speech, stand for election, vote for a particular candidate, publish a newspaper, write articles, or join any public forum unless the Syedna gives them permission. All institutions like hospitals, schools, and orphanages, along with charitable trusts endowed by wealthy Bohras must be maintained only in the Syedna's name.

Many educated Bohras have preferred to opt right out of the sect. Yaya Lokhandvalla was one such. When he died last year he was president of the Indian Rationalist Association and an active Atheist. Others have chosen to stay on and help fight for the rights of the credulous among the community. Ashgar Ali Engineer, brother-in-law to Lokhandvalla, is general secretary of the central board of the Bohra community and also active as vice president of the Committee for the

Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR).

The government refuses to get embroiled in the controversy because it needs the Bohra vote bank. The entire community will vote the way the Syedna tells them. During the Janata government's term a commission was appointed to investigate the Syedna's tyranny, but Mrs. Gandhi returned to power and did not take any action on the report. The Syedna contributes generously to national causes like party elections.

However, violent clashes between reformers and believers are now more frequent. The press has also begun publishing accounts of injustice within the community. Ashgar Ali Engineer believes that the reign of terror will intensify. Bohra priests in seminaries are being trained in psychological tactics.

Starting from a small nucleus, the reform movement is steadily growing in numbers. Many believers still within the fold secretly support it. But Engineer has no illusions about just what he is up against in challenging the Syedna. "If they think that by killing or paralyzing me, the movement will die, they are mistaken," he declares. "The struggle will go on."

HEAVEN OR BUST

Vedic Science

December 1984

As part of the silver jubilee celebrations of the Maharishi Mahesh's Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement (1957-1983), many of our newspapers and periodicals carried display ads with a picture of this phony of phonies. It appeared that the World Government of the Age of Enlightenment was now ready to solve the problems of any government

> regardless of the magnitude and nature of the problem — political, economic, social or religious; and irrespective of its system — capitalism, communism, socialism, democracy, or dictatorship.

A letter of intention was to be addressed to the Minister of Education at the World Government headquarters in Seelisberg, Switzerland. Complete confidentiality was assured after a contract was drawn up by a mutually acceptable international law firm in conjunction with an international bank. All problems would be solved on a basis of cost reimbursement after the project was completed.

The ads also appeared in international publications after a conference held at the Maharishi International University in Iowa. There, 7,000 people sat down together in meditation to "harmonize the world." According to their own statistics, this mass exercise in idleness made stock markets rise, cut down accident and crime rates, influenced world leaders toward more positive thinking, and raised the level of love now extant on the globe. Researchers who even tracked Reagan's moods declared "positive developments all over the world."

According to a recent report from Seelisberg, Marco Steifel, the

President of the Association of World Government, many governments have applied and their applications are being considered. Success is assured in every case.

> The unified field of all the laws of nature has been glimpsed by the supergravity theory of quantum physics, and its complete knowledge is available in ancient Vedic literature as recently brought to light by Maharishi.

Beat Odermatt, professor of cultural research at Seelisberg, says, "We have discovered the unified field by linking Vedic science and modern physics. Scientists are welcome to come and verify it."

Nobody has, but salesmen are traveling out to meet politicians and sell them their technology of the unified field. Demonstrations of this theory prove "that the square root of one percent of the world's population (7,000 individuals) is sufficient to enliven the evolutionary qualities of the unified field in the world consciousness."

Says Prof. Carlo Rubia of the European Centre for Nuclear Research in Geneva, where high-energy physics is used but not to affect stock markets and politics, "We are facing a major problem of ignorance here."

Mahesh Yogi discovered the Technology of the Unified Field between 1971 and 1982. Displaying a remarkable mastery of jabberwocky, he says that

> the objective approach of modern science has located the unified field as a self-interacting, self-referral reality. The subjective approach of ancient Vedic science brings the experience of self-referral reality in the simplest state of human awareness — transcendental consciousness.

Among all his other obscure sayings, one is "Flood of knowledge through science will verify Vedic truths." And again, "Every accomplished scientist in India is a Vedic. The Veda content flows through his veins."

Briefly, this means that everything we know today was known before. There is no knowledge, no science, which is not already found in the Vedas. But what are the Vedas?

dy of revealed literature, the Vedas are the bedrock
du civilization. They originated with a group of
who arrived in dia in the second millennium B.C. and called

themselves Aryans. There are four Vedas: Rig Veda, Yajurveda, Sama Veda, and Atharvaveda. The Rig Veda is the most important, and some reject the fourth one because it is full of magic and hocus-pocus. Modern scholars do not consider these scriptures to be as old as Indians do. Their origin is probably after 2500 B.C., and they consist chiefly of hymns and prayers composed for the propitiation of the many gods worshipped by the pastoral Aryans. The orthodox, however, believe they were created when the world began and were dictated by a god to four chosen persons. They also believe that the Vedas are the repository of knowledge and the fountainhead of every branch of science. They are timeless and therefore eternal. Anything worth knowing about the universe is found in them!

Manu, the ancient Hindu lawgiver, declared that no one must apply reason to the Vedas. If he does — and condemns them — he should be treated as an Atheist. In Hindu terms, an Atheist (*nastick*) is not one who disbelieves in a god but one who disbelieves the Vedas.

The word *Veda* comes from the root *vid* (to know). For centuries the Vedas remained an oral tradition, handed down by trained priests who spent a lifetime learning their contents and practicing their chanting. There are still a few surviving centers in India today where young Brahmins go through sixteen arduous years of training, of which four are devoted to astrology and the rest to phonetics, grammar, and etymology. When a Vedic word is uttered, there is a corresponding vibration in a particular nerve plexus (*nadi*) of the human body which tunes the mind and thought. So by the correct chanting of Vedic mantras, it is possible to produce positive impulses.

Says one Indian expert, quoting noted German physicist Dr. Brian Josephson's address to a conference of Nobel laureates (!), there is a connection between the pattern of sound oscillation of the Vedic words and their meanings. And, again, Dr. Carl-Friedich von Weizsaecker believed that "*prana* is a vitalizing power extended into space as a moving power. The quantum theory describes a phenomenon which is not totally different from *prana*."

Each sound must conform to eight rules with reference to particular parts of the body from which each sound emanates. The potency of the mantra depends entirely on these rules. Any variation in accent from region to region renders them ineffective. In fact, ancient seers refused to commit these *cantrips* to writing material as inert as stone, metal, leaves, or paper. They are a science of sound and accents learned and manipulated only through the ear. The original Vedas were written in *Dev Bhasha*, or the language of the gods, allegedly the mother of all

languages spoken in the world. Being in an obscure language, unwritten, and the monopoly of the priestly class preserved the Vedas for years. There was vigorous objection to secular scholars studying their contents. It was argued that those who had no faith in the magical quality of the mantras could not possibly grasp the real meaning of the text.

Indian rationalist and Sanskrit scholar Dr. Surenda Ajnat has closely analyzed the contents of these holy scriptures in his book *Critique on Vedas*. He refutes their infallibility and proves that, like the Christian Bible, they have their obscene passages dealing with incest, bestiality, debauchery, absurdities, medical folklore, contradictions, superstitions, and much else.

One chapter of his book is devoted to "Science in The Vedas." With the spread of Western education in India in the nineteenth century, many Hindus felt a sense of inferiority. They saw themselves "politically slaves, socially cancerous, economically weak, intellectually stagnant and mentally dogmatic." They then began looking back into their past for lost glory since the past could stand less scrutiny. Obscure texts in their many scriptures were now reinterpreted to mean new things. These interpretations turned up an astonishing number of scientific inventions and theories which had somehow been hidden in the text. According to Nirad Chaudhuri, "It was proclaimed that if a Hindu kept a pigtail it was only as an electromagnetic coil." Indeed, many customs and taboos were now scientifically explainable.

> If he bathed in the Ganges it was because an unspecified European (for preference, German) had demonstrated that Ganges water killed bacteria instantly. If he fasted at full and new moon it was only to counteract the gravitational forces of the sun and the moon.

I once had a young Brahmin girl explain to me that her mother had taught her that ritual purity in matters of preventing "others" from touching one's food dishes and utensils is essentially a scientific means of avoiding infection. (But this scientific theory does not explain why contagion is more likely from those of lower caste and not of one's own caste.)

Since most scriptures were in classical Sanskrit known to scholars, the new science had to be dug out of the Vedas which were recorded in older dialects. From that time to the present, it is widely believed that the Vedas comprise all branches of science and are full of information

hitherto unknown to the rest of the world. Closer scrutiny of some of these "facts" hardly support this tall claim. The earth is described as stationary. The sun is drawn across the sky in a chariot by seven horses. During an eclipse the moon is covered by a demon of darkness called Rahoo. It is in this same tradition that the Maharishi has "discovered" the technology of the unified field in his reading of Vedic wisdom. Some decades back one particular Hindu reformist, who founded a new sect with the cry "Back to the Vedas!" turned up evidence that the ancient Hindus knew about the wireless, or radio.He hung his theory on the single word *tarutaram*, which closely resembles the word for wire (*tar*). *Tarutaram* really means "defeating the enemy," but his interpretation ascribed to the ancients the invention of the wireless.

Vimana means celestial chariot. He took it to mean airplane. In the 1920s, a scholar in Bangalore turned up with detailed drawings of a flying machine supposedly designed by the ancients. It was found to be a fraud with the blueprints done by a student of engineering, but many Hindus still believe it was genuine.

It is claimed that the ancients also built rockets and traveled in space in inter-planetary rockets. "I have gone to the sky from the earth and from the sky to the heaven," says the text, actually referring to a household rite recorded in the Veda.

There is nothing a von Daniken can teach these scholars! Ancient mantras were actually computer circuits, we're told. Nuclear weapons were used in the great war of the Mahabharata, fought on a sixteen-acre plot in northern India some time between the fourth and the second century B.C. Addressing the eighth world conference on the Ancient Astronaut Society in Vienna, the Indian delegate declared that ancient India had about forty aircraft of eight different designs used by super-humans (gods). His was the first scholarly effort to make a catalogue of these flying machines mentioned in the Vedas and other scriptures down to the fourteenth-century scholar Sayanacharya. These planes are supposed to have had three pilots and to have carried up to seventeen passengers.

When early Western scholars in India tried to record the Vedas in order to study them, they were met with hostility by the priestly caste. Max Muller finally succeeded in bringing out the first editions. He was strongly criticized for this sacrilege. His own contention was to "discover in the Vedas steam engines, electricity and European philosophy and morality is to deprive them of their true character."

Creative intelligence, the unified field theory, transcendental medi-

tation, levitation, the art of turning oneself invisible are some of the discoveries made by the Maharishi from the Vedas. Since the Vedas are inexhaustable and eternal, we can look forward to more surprises.

Ajnat, Dr. Surendra. *Critique on Vedas*. Jullundur, India: Amarjyotii Press, 1979.

India's "Third Nation"

January 1985

As I write, a group of Indians is observing the birthday of the founder of its sect. He was a man of peace named Guru Nanak, born in the Punjab in 1469 during bitter times when Muslims had subjugated almost the entire peninsula and ruled from Delhi. Hatred and intolerance prevailed. Nanak's simple message of brotherhood declared, "There is no Hindu. There is no Mussulman."

Eight days before the time of this writing, two followers of this apostle of communal peace gunned down Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. They did so in fulfillment of a religious vow.

I ought to mention here that Indira Gandhi was not related to Mahatma Gandhi. She was the only daughter of former Prime Minister Nehru and had married a Parsi named Feroze Gandhi. As a child, however, she was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, since her family was at the storm center of the movement for Indian independence. Ironically, both she and Mahatma Gandhi fell victim to the bullets of religious fanatics in a country whose people never tire of telling how tolerant and non-violent they are. Gandhi was slain by a Hindu Brahmin who believed he made too many concessions to the Muslims when Pakistan was created by vivisecting his beloved motherland. Indira Gandhi was killed by Sikh extremists who want to carve out yet another chunk for themselves and create the Sikh state of Khalistan.

Anywhere in the world Sikhs are easily recognizable by their beards and turbans. They tend to cultivate a martial tradition in their religion which would have worried their founder who was actually a Hindu

reformer. Nanak's message was syncretic in spirit, striking a sensible balance between Islamic fanaticism and intolerance and Hindu ritualism, caste, and idolatry. He preached monotheism and equality, which won him many converts from people desiring to break free of a caste-ridden value system. His followers were called *shishya* (Sanskrit for disciple) which is now "Sikh."

Beginning with Nanak (1469-1539) there were ten gurus in all. The last was Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708). Sikhism captured the imagination of the Punjabi peasantry, a robust and turbulent people. Their constant quarrels with the rulers of Delhi earned them the displeasure of the Mughals. Their leaders were captured and publicly impaled or executed. The ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur refused to be converted and had his head cut off in Chandni Chowk in Delhi. He was succeeded by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final guru, who was then just nine years old.

Convinced that the Sikhs must make themselves strong enough to fight repression, he transformed the sect into a militant fraternity. He decreed that henceforth they were to be called *khalsa* — the pure ones — and assume the name of *Singh* (lion). They were to be perpetually prepared to do battle by assuming the five "Ks" as marks of the true Sikh — *kesh* (hair), *kanga* (comb), *kara* (steel bangle), *kirpan* (short dagger) and *kachcha* (under-drawers).

Meat was added to their diet. Holy warriors or soldiers of the faith were called *akalis* (similar to the Islamic *ghazies*). The Muslim concept of martyrdom in *Jehad* (holy war) was matched by *dharmaudh*. Suicide squads were raised called *Nihangs* (Persian for crocodile). There are 20,000 of these today, largely nomadic, armed with ancient swords, spears, shields and flintlocks; and usually high on hash.

The Islamic prohibition on alcohol was matched by a ban on tobacco. When an Akali-dominated government ruled Punjab state a few years back, an official notice was sent a round saying that no Sikh with shorn hair should be appointed to office. In the capital of Chandigarh, where half the secretariat houses the Punjab government and the other half that of Haryana state, officials wishing to have a smoke had to stroll down the corridor to the Haryana end!

The tenth guru, the much-revered Govind Singh, was murdered by Muslims. Because of historical circumstance, Sikhism developed a strong anti-Muslim bias, quite unlike anything their founder had imagined.

The partition of India in 1947 was achieved by the simple expedient of drawing lines through Punjab and Bengal to create two wings of the

Islamic state of Pakistan. But this left 5,000,000 Sikhs and Hindus on the Pakistan side and 5,000,000 Muslims on the Indian side. The migration of these great hordes of people on foot and by every means of transport available sparked off the bloodiest slaughter the plains of Hindustan ever witnessed even during the many incursions of armies of barbarians from central Asia.

The Sikhs in the Punjab were the worst sufferers. Today, thirty-seven years later, they in turn confront the Hindus with surreptitious help from their old enemies, the Muslims in Pakistan. Sikh extremists have training camps over the frontier and evade arrest by crossing into that country. Enormous quantities of arms and ammunition have been brought in through Pakistan.

To the Hindus, this appears as treachery of the worst sort, a betrayal of the motherland. They resisted the breaking up of their country to create a Muslim state and are resolved they will not stand by to see it further weakened by creating a Sikh state.

For Sikhs, their age of greatest glory was when Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) established a kingdom which extended from the Khyber Pass to the Sutlej River and from Kashmir to the desert of Sind. After his death, it disintegrated and was annexed by the British in 1849. The modern Sikh vision of Khalistan is a revival of that glory with territory approximating Ranjit Singh's former kingdom.

In a sense we are still reaping the whirlwind sown by self-seeking politicians during the struggle for freedom. To establish their own power bases they thought up the "Two Nation Theory" to support their contention that Hindu and Muslim culture simply could not be reconciled and therefore, as distinct "nations," they ought to be granted separate sovereignty. By dividing the subcontinent according to the religious make-up of its population West and East Pakistan was created. What was left of a truncated peninsula became India.

The "Two Nation Theory" was effectively debunked when East Pakistan went to war against West Pakistan. Despite being Muslims, the Bengalis of East Pakistan wished to throw off the yoke of Punjabi domination from West Pakistan. This was achieved with India's help creating the populous Islamic state of Bangala Desh.

At the time of partition talks with the British government a question was raised by Sikh leaders who put forward a claim as a "Third Nation;" however, Nehru's Congress party assured them their claims would be given due consideration after independence. Their hopes were belied. Discontent simmered in the Punjab, fueled by Hindu bigotry and dominance in areas which Sikhs regarded theirs by natural right. It was

a repeat of history with confrontation with the rulers from Delhi.

For more than three years now Sikh extremists have been carrying out a campaign of killing, abduction, bombing, and sabotage in the Punjab, Delhi, and Rejasthan. Moderate Sikhs have been gunned along with Hindus. The terrorist tactics were spearheaded by a fanatical, illiterate Sikh priest called Sant Bindranwale. To evade arrest, he holed up with his followers in the Golden Temple in the holy city of Amritsar. Hit-men came out of the shrine, carried out their missions, and went back into hiding. For months, Mrs. Gandhi's government hesitated to send police in for fear of hurting the religious sentiments of the entire community.

Finally, last June, the Indian army launched "Operation Blue Star" to purge the shrine of criminals. It met with strong resistance. The entire complex had been fortified, and the extremists armed with the most sophisticated weapons available on the international market. Casualties were high among the Indian soldiers. We were never told how many Sikhs died. Sant Bindranwale was among the dead in the basement of the temple. Sikh sources from abroad put the dead at three thousand including many women and children trapped inside the complex. Bodies were disposed of in a mass cremation with the city still under heavey curfew.

The historic buildings of the holiest of Sikh shrines were damaged, the chief being the Akal Takt, a kind of Vatican, whence fiats go out to the faithful around the world. This was restored by a pro-government Nihang chief and his shaggy followers because the five high priests wanted to display the ruins to devotees and whip up more anti-government feeling. All Sikhs were deeply hurt by the desecration of their Golden Temple. None were prepared to accept the argument that the desecration really took place when it became a place of refuge for murderers and terrorists.

An astonishing quantity of arms and ammunition turned up, not only in the Golden Temple but in other Sikh shrines. The army operation had the support of the people because it made life a little sager for the common man. Pakistan's role was condemned, though it still denies it supported Bindranwale. Possibly the bravest man at Mrs. Gandhi's funeral was President Zia of Pakistan.

The storming of the Golden Temple rankled deeply. But it also divided the community in different ways. Sikhs number 10,000,000, which is just 2 percent of our population, but they have spread into every major city in the country and made their presence felt by their industry and enterprise.

President Zail Singh has stood on the side of conciliation and sanity — for which he was excommunicated by the high priests. There are many Sikh intellectuals who insist that it is possible for the community to live with the rest of us Indians without needing to establish a separate state.

But the orthodox believe that Sikhism was shaped largely by political expediency, and for its adherents religion and politics are one. Only in a Sikh state can the religion find free practice, a state in which Atheism and un-Sikh thinking will be replaced by the "Sikh way of life."

Khalistan would include not only large areas of north India but a sizeable chunk of Pakistan. This fact has not yet dawned on its Muslim sympathizers across the border! Militancy remains part of the Sikh ethos. Every prayer ends with the words, *Raj karega Khalsa, aki rahe na haye* (the *khalsa* will rule one day and nobody will be able to stand up to him).

The assassination of Indira Gandhi was the old savage equation of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Many Sikhs exulted, believing the insult done to them and their shrines had been avenged. The killers were both Sikhs of her own bodyguard whom she refused to mistrust. One had been part of her household for eight years and grown close to her family. But religious fanaticism does not stop for such sentimental niceties.

The protagonists of India's "Third Nation" are undeterred by the Hindu backlash which took the lives of many of their community after Mrs. Gandhi's death. Nor are they worried too much about the repungnance expressed by the international community. Their campaign will go on. They also have the present prime minister and many other high officials on their hit list.

It intrigues me as an Atheist to watch the antics of the pious and the bizarre power games which they play in this country. Ethnically, all spring from a common stock which once embraced Hinduism. History saw thousands converted to Islam. This process, we're told, created two "nations." I wish I could believe that. What I see are people of common stock polarizing into two groups because one excises their foreskins and the other prefers to keep theirs. The "Third Nation" of Sikhs was also Hindu at one time, but it stakes its claim to sovereignty simply because its followers keep their hair and beards, carry three items of hardware on their person, and sport a particular kind of underwear!

Christianity and The Hindu Caste System

February 1985

One aspect of Indian society which confounds visitors is the vast, institutionalized pecking order called the caste system. Indians themselves can't say how many castes there now are — probably a couple of thousand. Originally, there were only four, and the hierarchy was simpler.

At the top were the Brahmins or the priestly class; next came the warriors, kings, and aristocrats, forming the Kshatriya caste. The Vaishya caste looked after trade and commerce, and at the bottom of the pyramid were the Shudras who functioned as artisans and workers. A fifth group, outside the pale and under everyone's feet, were the Outcastes, or Untouchables.

Nobody could move up and down the hierarchy at will. One had to be born a Hindu within a particular caste to lay claim to an identity. Each caste, however, soon became divided into sub-castes by family and clan. Regional Hindu sects are also stratified on caste lines, but their members do not see themselves as a countrywide fraternity. For instance, a north Indian Brahmin would not deign to eat with a Kerala Brahmin. And, while Brahmins head the movement for banning cow slaughter throughout India, there are sects of Brahmins in the south who relish beef.

The caste system has played havoc with our democratic institutions. Politicians campaign along caste lines. People in top posts appoint subordinates of their own caste. Appointments in universities and colleges are often heavily weighted to favor certain castes. We have inter-caste riots in which upper caste landowners terrorize, burn, and

kill lower castes and Outcastes because they are now becoming aware of their rights as humans.

Those at the top argue that the caste system is the only thing which holds Indian society toghether. Those at the bottom see it for what it really is — an inhuman system of oppression and contempt sanctioned by religion.

Historians differ on how the system evolved, but the one which concerns us here is the mythological origin. According to one sacred Hindu text, the four castes spring from a deity — the Brahmin from his face, the Kashatriya from his arms, the Vaishya from his thighs, and the Shudra from his feet.

In the Bhagavad Gita — the Hindu Bible — the god Krishna says

> The four orders of society were created by me, classifying them according to their prenatal qualities and appointing corresponding duties to them.

Some of the orthodox interpret this to mean that the ancient Indians knew all about genetics, and therefore caste is a scientific division of humans according to their inherent ability. Another passage in the Gita lists these genetically determined talents "born of their respective natures," and for the Shudras it declares, "Service of all the three castes is the Shudra's duty, born of his own nature."

The Outcaste is not mentioned at all. But his lot was, and still is, a million times worse than the Shudra's, even without scriptural sanction.

Arjun, who holds a long dialogue with Krishna in the Gita, describes the value of the caste system and the need to preserve caste purity:

> Age-long family traditions disappear with the destruction of the family, and, virtue having been lost, sin takes hold of the entire family. With the preponderance of vice, the women of the family become corrupt, and with the corruption of women there ensues an intermixture of castes. Intermixture of castes leads the destroyers of the race as well as the race itself to hell. Through these evils, bringing about an intermixture of castes, the age-long caste traditions and family customs of the destroyers of the race become extinct. Men who have lost their family traditions dwell in hell for an indefinite period of time.

The best way of preventing women from playing havoc with the social system is to arrange their marriages within their own caste. First and second generation Indians who have settled abroad return home to get

their sons and daughters married. Our dailies have pages devoted to matrimonial ads, each of which gives details of caste, sect, and other relevant information of family and bloodline. They could as well be published under "Kennel and Livestock".

Other non-Hindu communities also advertise for brides and grooms, and here, too, religious distinctions are made like Protestant, Catholic, Shia, Sunni, and so on. However, some read rather strangely, as that of a Goan Catholic Brahmin inviting correspondence from families of similar caste.

This peculiar mix of orthodox Christian and orthodox Hindu comes from Goa's past as a Portuguese colony. In 1510, along with the colonizers came the missionaries. When persuasion and incentive failed to convert the Hindus, force was used. Their shrines were destroyed and churches built in their places. Heathen practices were banned by law, and in 1560 the Inquisition arrived to deal with those converts who reverted to their old ways. Christianization advanced apace through "fire, steel, the dungeon and the rack, the rice pot, and the rupee."

No Hindu could hold property or land. Many fled; others converted. Many venerated their gods in secret while professing Catholicism outwardly. By the time the laws grew less stringent, this mixed tradition had become entrenched in families for a couple of generations. Today one can see Goans attend mass as pious Roman Catholics in the morning, but some will then proceed to the local Hindu temple where special prayers and offerings are made for their welfare and their crops.

Conversions also took place by other missionaries in the rest of the country, but before the advent of Christianity with European traders, Islam had already established itself on the subcontinent from the twelfth century. It had converted thousands, and these were drawn from the lowest castes who were attracted by its message of brotherhood. Conversions were also done by force. To the unfortunate Untouchables, both Islam and Christianity offered escape from the intolerable oppression of caste Hindus. They formed the bulk of converts to both religions.

The Outcastes today number one hundred million. Their work, according to tradition, is to dispose of cattle carrion, function as tanners and leather workers, clean lavatories, and sweep the streets. In the country, they till landlords' fields and work as bonded slaves and landless laborers. In villages, they live in segregated sections, with their own wells. Their touch is pollution, and even their shadows falling on a caste Hindu and his possessions pollute him. In Kerala, they were also

regarded as unseeable and had to shout in warning before they passed through a place where caste Hindus might be forced to set eyes on them. The torture, injustice, and oppression to which they are still subjected would fill many volumes. The government has a system of job reservations and educational schemes to help raise their status. We even have a law which has "abolished" untouchability, but it persists.

Gandhi renamed the Untouchables *Harijan* — "children of god" — a patronizing term which they resent. Their leader was a remarkable man named Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who framed our country's constitution. He called Gandhi a humbug and regarded his ideas on Harijan uplift as a lot of whitewash. Gandhi claimed that caste is scientific and we should not do away with it, but to its worst victims, caste has always stood for contempt and untouchability.

Today the contempt caste Hindus feel towards Outcastes is also extended to Muslims and Christians, many of whom are drawn from among them. But so strong is the hold of caste on people's minds that these distinctions persist even within the more democratic Christian churches. High-caste converts will not form marriage alliances with low-caste converts. In churches in the south, communion is given separately, with lower castes sitting apart.

In Tamil Nadu, Harijan converts have been fighting for decades for the right to be buried alongside high-caste Roman Catholics. Some time ago, railings separating upper-caste burial plots from the low were moved throughout south India except in the city of Madras. Some of the Brahmin and other high-caste converts were angry at this "heretical" act and walked out of the church during mass to go and join a dissident Jacobite sect.

In convents and seminaries, the caste factor plays a decisive role. Caste decides elections in convents and parish councils of the Roman Catholic Church all the way to Cape Comorin, the southernmost tip of India. There, two Roman Catholic groups are in conflict, the Camarone fishermen and the wealthier Tabelites who own trawlers and processing plants. Inter-marriage is not allowed, and any young couple wanting to crash barriers must move away to a big city. The priests side with the more affluent upper-caste Roman Catholics.

In seven Roman Catholic villages in Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu, there is a rare contagion called the *yelu ooru* (seven villages) syndrome. The converts here see themselves as special and of a higher caste because their ancestors were converted by the French! Priests and nuns who form the *yelu ooru* make it a point to promote their own caste people to top positions.

Many Tamilian nuns come from small towns and villages. Here the low castes and Harijans are made to walk on a particular side of the road. Some roads are banned to them altogether. These novices bring their caste prejudices into the convents. Until recently, Harijan novices were discouraged from joining. Also, as brides of Christ, each girl must bring a dowry with her when she joins the convent. Since the Hairjan and other lower-castes novices cannot bring much because of their poverty, they are treated with contempt and forced to do all the most menial jobs in the convent.

Gandhi declared that caste is scientific and therefore we should not do away with it. But he was all for abolishing untouchability. To prove he meant what he said, he always lived among the scavengers when in Delhi and had organized a Harijan uplift society. However, the stigma of contempt and untouchability and the entire caste concept are two sides of the same coin to the many victims of a callous and cruel social order. There is unlikely to be any change as long as religion continues to sanction it.

A God That Failed

March 1985

J. Krishnamurti, described by one writer rather strangely as "the last of the mystics," is quite unlike the normal breed of god-creeps India spawns. Now ninety years old, he remains an iconoclast. He spurns religious ritual and idol worship, denounces organised religion and gurus, and claims there is no god, no heaven, no hell, no past, no after-life.

This article is not about Jiddu Krishnamurti's modest message but about the remarkable frauds who tried to shape him into a new messiah, a role he rejected outright at the age of thirty-five. The cult was the Theosophical Society, of which small splinter groups still survive today.

The Theosophical Society was founded by the flamboyant fraud Helena Petrova Blavatsky. Born in 1831 in the Ukraine, she had a bizarre career as medium, magician, and bigamist in Constantinople, Cairo, Russia, Paris, and finally New York. In 1874, she met Col. Henry Steel Olcott at a spiritual seance in Vermont. So impressed was he by her "powers" that he was prepared to abandon his wife and children and endure her massive build, heavy Russian accent, fog-horn voice, frizzy hair, bright red shirts, and her addiction to pot.

The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875. Over the years, Blavatsky grew in wisdom and understanding, adding cabalism, numerology, prophecy, astrology, and other trivia to her uneducation, along with more weird wisdom like the Hindu concept of rebirth and karma. She claimed she was in touch with *Mahatmas* (Great Spirits) who kept up a coded system of communication with her and lived on the lofty plateau of Tibet — a place much too far for any sceptic to go

out and check.

Declaring themselves the "Theosophical twins," Blavatsky and Olcott came ashore at Bombay in December 1898. They toured the country and created a considerable stir. Blavatsky enlisted the help of a house servant who knew a lot of parlor tricks, and table-rapping became the rage. In northern India, in the Himalayas, she was very close indeed to her *Mahatmas*. Astral bells pealed near the ceiling and moved about darkening drawing-rooms where she held seances. Spirits rapped on the furniture and, with unconscious humor, even rapped on the bald pates of high government British officials present in the assembly. We're not told whether they rang hollow.

Finding the freaky scenario in India entirely suited to their absurd antics, they established the headquarters of the Hindu Theosophical Society at Adyar near Madras. A Buddhist Society was also set up in Ceylon. The membership swelled with Madame Blavatsky in charge of the special-effects department — the Esoteric Section.

What was their belief? Not much different from other cults. They preached a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity and the law of Karma, in which the ego is recycled until it reaches the Path of Discipleship eventually leading to Adepthood and membership of the Great White Brotherhood of perfect beings. Later, Blavatsky evolved more complex concepts from her drug-induced hallucinations, the chief being the imminent arrival of another messiah as World Teacher. Also, his advent always ushered in a new sub-race. This time it was to be the sixth sub-race of the fifth root-race that was to develop in Australia.

Among the ones who had achieved Adepthood there were some who preferred to postpone taking their prizes and instead stayed on among humans to help them along the stony Path. These were two *Mahatmas*, Master Morya and Master Kuthumi (Koot Hoomi). They both live in Tibet, though I imagine things must have changed somewhat for them after the Chinese occupation.

Ethically, Big Brother Kuthumi is a Kashmiri Brahmin and decidedly Aryan — with fair skin, sparking blue eyes and a long brown beard. His friend Morya is a dark, handsome Rajput prince with long black beard and flashing eyes. Blavatsky met them often in their human form, which makes one suspect she was probably onto something harder than pot. She and Olcott also hobnobbed with them on an astral level when the two beamed in at Adyar in their etheric form. Then they slipped through the keyhole into the closed room and chatted with the Theosophical twins — at least, this is what devotees were asked to believe, and so they did.

Climbing higher up the ladder crowded with glorious beings, at the very top of the hierarchy, is the World Teacher, the messiah, who is Christ to the West, Buddha to the East, and Lord Maitreya to the Hindus. This being has appeared already, once as Krishna, once as Christ. It was now time for him to make a third appearance on-stage, but while he waited to be cued in, he was living next door to Morya and Kuthami in a small cottage with a beautiful garden somewhere in Tibet. Lord Maitreya was also very handsome, but his taste in colours ran to violet eyes and red-gold hair.

Blavatsky's declared mission now was to prepare the world for the coming of the messiah, Lord Maitreya. The upper story of the bungalow at Adyar had an occult room with a shrine covered with thick curtains. In this the Mahatmas obligingly tossed answers on notes in reply to devotees' questions. The housekeeper at Adyar was Blavatsky's old friend from her days in Cairo, Emma Cutting, now married to Coulomb, a Frenchman. He looked after the estate while she depositioned the missives in the shrine through a sliding panel behind the shrine.

On a visit to London, Olcott and Blavatsky were grilled by the Society for Psychical Research and came off very poorly, with Madame losing her temper when questioned too closely. Back in India, meanwhile, the lid was blown when the trustees accused the Coulombs of embezzling the Society's funds and expelled them from the premises. They handed forty of Blavatsky's letters to the press for publication. These gave details on how to produce certain magical effects. The Psychical Society promptly sent out a Cambridge graduate, Richard Hodgson, who questioned the Coulombs and some members. But when he finally got to examine the upstairs shrine, he found a freshlyplastered wall in place of the secret panel. Handwriting experts, however, established that the notes written by the *Mahatmas* were in the hand of Blavatsky and an Indian convert, Damodar. Blavatsky returned from England shortly after, bringing with her an ex-curate named Charles W. Leadbeater, middle-aged and with a sadistic penchant for debauching little boys. She was now threatened with law suits and disgrace because of the Coulombs' exposé, so the Society sent her back to England where she settled until her death.

It was at this point that Annie Besant made her debut, having already earned considerable notoriety by her declared Atheism. But all the causes she supported she did with great fervor, from feminism to birth control, then socialism and finally spiritualism. Involved in a passionate affair with playwright George Bernard Shaw at the time, she fell under Blavatsky's spell and turned from socialism to theosophy. Shaw

confronted her and reminded her that Blavatsky had been exposed at a meeting of the Psychical Society where he himself had been present, but she refused to take it seriously. "Why need you go to Tibet for a *Mahatma*?" he cried facetiously. "Here and now is your *Mahatma*. I am your *Mahatma*."

Besant toured the United States declaring the imminent arrival of the messiah, and after the old fraud Blavatsky succumbed to the flu, she took on her mission of preparing the world. Olcott remained president of the Society until his death in 1907, and Besant arrived in India and fervently embraced Hinduism.

Today most Indians remember her for her part in the freedom movement. She was even elected President of the Indian Nation Congress founded by Octavian Allen Hume, an Englishman sympathethic to the Indian cause. Hume had also come under Blavatsky's spell, thrown up his job and gone off to Tibet to find her *Mahatmas*. He left the Society a wiser man.

Besant concentrated her energies on finding a suitable candidate for messiahship. She took a fourteen-year-old American lad with his mother over to India but found that Leadbeater had already found a likely messiah in an Indian boy named Jiddu Krishnamurti.

Born in May 1895, in a hill-town some 150 miles north of Madras, Krishnamurti came to the Adyar ashram with his father and brothers. Leadbeater was struck by the "luminous aura" of the fourteen-year-old boy and declared that he would be the World Teacher. Nobody believed him. The boy was moronic, shabby, and sickly, lagging behind his classfellows and often cuffed soundly for his stupidity.

Undaunted, Leadbeater now began making startling revelations. In the Society's journal he declared the lad was a spiritual being named Alcyone. Investigations of his former existences turned up thirty incarnations, the first as early as the year 11,622 B.C. and the most recent in A.D. 624. In eleven incarnations, Alcyone had been female. In addition, Besant had been present in all these former existences, along with others, under outlandish pseudonyms.

Krishnamurti was now groomed for messiahship. Scrubbed, deloused, and dentally braced, he was introduced to the English language, with great care devoted to his diction. Every night he made an astral trip to Master Kuthumi's cottage in Tibet and Leadbeater wrote down all he recalled in the morning. This book, *At The Feet Of The Master*, was Krishnamurti's first. Today it runs in fifty editions in forty languages.

His father, an employee at the ashram, resented the time spent with Leadbeater. The ex-curate had already caused a scandal by his

homosexual activities among the boys at the ashram. Krishnamurti's father tried without success to get the boy out of the curate's clutches. But Besant proved too formidable for him.

Details were announced of the ritual for the messiah's initiation, in which he would lie naked on Besant's bed and Leadbeater would lie on the floor for two nights and a day. After this, Krishnamurti supposedly recalled conversations he'd had with Christ, Buddha, and the *Mahatmas*. Besant's house servant, however, said he had seen the pair prancing about the room nude and some rather un-messiahlike frolics in the bath.

Krishnamurti's father demanded the boy's return, but Besant foiled his efforts. She now announced the Order of the Star in the East. Disciples came flocking. The organizing secretary was A. E. Wodehouse, brother of the famous P. G. He edited their quarterly. By 1928, 45,000 members had joined this moronic mob.

Besant took the messiah off to England to open a new headquarters. Krishnamurti's father filed a suit in 1913 to recover his son. In his complaint he said he had actually seen Leadbeater sodomising his son. The house servant was also called as witness. Besant herself argued the case in the Madras High Court. Leadbeater was let off, and the boy was declared a ward of the court. Undeterred, Besant went on to the privy council and finally won custody. But Krishnamurti's own sympathies were with the Society, and he broke with his father.

Launched as a god-man, he had a vast organization working to promote him. The rich and the brainless thronged about him, giving him money and real estate as gifts. He was a failure in other areas, unable to get through high school in one attempt and refused admission to Oxford and Cambridge.

Public lectures, spiritual congresses, and travel around the world now took up all his time. He was fawned upon, imposed upon, and overwhelmed. His frequent physical collapses were described as psychic traumas. He hallucinated and spent sleepless nights. Pushed beyond all endurance by fakes, frauds, and freaks, he began to crack up.

Somewhere in all the welter of fame, money, and fraudulence, he had his moment of truth. Turning on his creators, he suddenly declared he was *not* the World Teacher. He was *no* teacher. Since the truth lies within each of us, no one can show anyone the way.

Besant was appalled. She promptly thought up a stop-gap savior in the person of a famous dancer from Madras and declared that she was a reincarnation of the Virgin Mary! In 1929, at the age of thirty-five,

Krishnamurti dissolved the Order of the Star, returned the real estate he had received as a gift, threw the other properties open to the public, and declared his resignation from the Theosophical Society. There is no teacher, he said. Besant receded into twilight in her closing years, and died in 1933. Hesketh Pearson, Bernard Shaw's biographer, tells of how the playwright met Krishnamurti once in Bombay. Shaw thought Krishnamurti was the most beautiful human he had ever seen. He also admired him for his common sense and high character in refusing to be a messiah. He asked how Mrs. Besant was. "Very well, but at her great age she cannot think consecutively," replied Krishnamurti.

"She never could," whispered Shaw. Krishnamurti smiled.

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Virtue Restored

April 1985

Human interest stories in our papers are usually about women. They make good copy by getting themselves burned for a dowry or by jumping into wells after being raped. Sometimes we get another kind of report — like the exposé on pregnancy tests being used to abort female fetuses about which I wrote in the June 1983, issue of the *American Atheist*. Recently some newspaper reporters turned over another stone, and for a few days, the crawlies under it made news. This time it was hymenoplasty — the surgical restoration of virginity in unmarried girls.

Before coming to that, some background to the concepts of chastity might be in order. Some years back, matrimonial ads always asked for "fair, beautiful, homely, convent-educated virgins." *Homely* means home-loving, and *convent-educated* means English-speaking. The word *virgin*, however, has been dropped for some unknown reason. I'm sure it isn't as a concession to a new permissiveness because the same rigid conventions prevail as before. In some communities, the bedsheets are viewed the morning after the wedding to satisfy the bride's in-laws that their son's new wife is as good and virtuous as the day she came off the assembly line.

The alarming increase of venereal disease among college students, particularly in metropolitan cities like Bombay and Delhi, points to a high level of sexual activity. This is especially worrying because parents refuse to face the question frankly with their children.

Most Indian men, despite having been sexually active themselves before marriage, insist that their brides be virgins. A women's magazine

published from Bombay once interviewed a few well-known men on the question. I remember a film actor and producer declaring that he would not like a nonvirgin for a bride any more than he'd like putting on someone else's dirty shirt. The idea that a "fallen woman" is like soiled linen fitted in well with his own vulgarization of man-woman concepts projected through his own film productions. And he is only one of many.

The superstition persists that the presence of that small triangular fold of tissue is proof of female goodness and virtue. Its absence, from any reason whatever, is proof of wicked wantoness. But the fact is that Indian girls are now more active in vigorous sports and games, and that there are far greater chances of accidental rupturing.

Because of the many different cultures prevalent here in India, one finds widely differing attitudes towards pre-marital sex. The Warli tribe living in the wooded hills near Bombay have companiate marriages. If the girl becomes pregnant, she has reason to be very happy about it and the marriage ritual is then solemnized. If nothing comes of the trial relationship or if the two prove incompatible, they are free to part amicably and try out other partners. Hindu social workers are now trying to convince them of the sinfulness of this sensible custom.

Consequences

I was once somewhat startled when a young friend about to be married wanted my advice on whether she should go to a doctor for surgical perforation before her honeymoon. Some of her friends had done so. She came from an orthodox, middle-class, Hindu background, and I am sure that her mother wouldn't have approved. She didn't have it done, however, because she wasn't sure how her *fiancé* would take it.

Another couple I knew, Christian this time, had married late in life, and within months the relationship had turned ugly with accusations and counter-accusations. He declared she hadn't been chaste even after marriage. In fact, said he, from the showing of their first night together, she hadn't even been much of a virgin.

The obligation to prove herself utterly virtuous lies heavily on the conscience of an Indian woman. This holds true for married women and widows.

The goddess Sita is the heroine of the *Ramayana*, a beautifully written old epic venerated by the Hindus. It tells of Sita's abduction by Ravana, the demon-king of Ceylon. Her husband, Rama, rescues her and brings her home, but his subjects seriously doubt her chastity since she had lived for months in Ravana's castle as a captive. To satisfy her

detractors, Rama allows her to undergo ordeal by fire.

She has a funeral pyre prepared saying:

When the shadow of dishonor darkens o'er a woman's life,
Death alone is a friend and refuge of a true and faithful wife.
When a righteous lord and husband turns his cold averted eyes,
Funeral flames dispel suspicion, honor lives when woman dies!

Sita emerges unscathed from the fire, and, as a paragon of virtue, she is held up as a model for Hindu girls. In fact, in most of our films this theme turns up in different forms. Womanly virtue and fidelity is put to the severest test by ordeal and suffering at the end of which the victim is rewarded with beatitude. For women, death is recommended as more desirable than dishonour. Widows seek refuge in extreme and rigorous kinds of piety. Their reputations are safe from wagging tongues when chastity is practiced as a pious necessity.

Seamy Sides

Sexual repression in men and women is largely responsible for many of our social ills. They are unable to have open, frank, and entirely platonic relationships with each other. As a result, women are not safe in any place, and there is a rising incidence of rape in our cities.

Middle-class morality masks an uglier, seamy side which comes out in the harassment and ill treatment of women in the streets and in co-educational colleges. Films and popular songs are suggestively vile, with strong sexual overtones. Some years ago one such song went like this: "If you and I were locked into a room and the key got lost, what would happen?" Voyeurism at its subtle best! But with all heroines affected with the Sita Symdrome, my guess is that nothing would happen — not behind that locked door anyway. After the key was found and the pair let out, he would boast to his friends what an easy conquest she had proven to be so that none should doubt his virility. And she, to prove that she was virtuous still, would jump off a high building or swallow rat poison. It is very important that a girl not only assiduously avoid sin, she must even avoid the appearance of being sinful because Indian society makes no distinction between the two conditions.

Our peculiar ambivalence toward sex is reflected in the Indian contempt of the "permissive West." In films, the more liberated white woman is projected as being unchaste in contrast to the pious and restricted Indian heroine. I recall once reading a letter in a national daily

in which the writer, a male, said that no other country in the world had been able to sublimate sex as we Indians have, transforming the grossly sexual impulse into a mystical one. The decadent West could learn much from us. This — from a citizen of a nation bursting at the seams from overbreeding itself!

When abortion clincs were opened in Bombay and MTP (medical termination of pregnancy) was legalized, more unmarried girls came for treatment than married ones. There was also a startlingly high incidence of incest involving fathers-in-law.

Hymenoplasty

In a patrilineal system, the arranged marriage makes everything — including virginity — negotiable. Hymenoplasty has been around for centuries in folk-medicine. But it has now become a part of flourishing medical practices in Bombay, where some of the city's leading gynecologists and plastic surgeons have been performing the operations for more than a decade. According to one news report, many of the girls come in from the Middle East and belong to the upper classes of Muslim society in those countries. They pay up to 20,000 rupees ($2,000 U.S.) to have their virginity restored. One doctor disclosed that he did the operation only out of compassion when patients approached him in a state of "desperation." At that price, it must be easy to be compassionate.

Deserted by their lovers and forced into arranged alliances by their parents, many of the girls were accompanied by their mothers who were worried that they might never find husbands if they were not virgins or that they might be abandoned after marriage and become a burden to their families. In one case, a father had threatened to murder his daughter when he discovered her condition.

The identity of the girls is protected by keeping them in small private nursing homes. One operation consists of paring the edges of the torn hymen and suturing them. But a more reliable method has been developed by a plastic surgeon in which mucosal tissue of the vaginal walls are sutured instead. The surgeon claims this provides the girl with a "thick hymen" — to prove to the husband that she is extremely virtuous since bleeding will be profuse. Cycling, gymnastics, and other vigorous sports are discouraged for at least four weeks after surgery.

The doctors interviewed by the reporter all took the view that they were rendering a valuable social service. Said one, "It's a question of the girl's life. If she doesn't bleed on the first night, her whole future is at

stake. She will be thrown out by her husband and be reduced to utter destitution."

A woman health researcher takes a different stand; "I suppose hymenoplasty could be justified within the limitations of such an argument," she says.

> On the other hand, if you popularize it and make it more widely available, this phenomenon will reinforce the old beliefs and odious nupital customs which are dying out, particularly in urban situations.

A feminist member of the Foundation for Research in Community Health comdemns it as "the most tangible expression of double standards we have about sexuality."

According to her, a well-known gynecologist of Bangalore, whose patients are drawn chiefly from the middle-class trading communities, has taken the initiative of advising surgical removal of the hymen to avoid the subsequent trauma not only for the girl, but to her husband and in-laws. She has had considerable success in convincing her patients.

The entire warped view of women's virtue being located in that part of their anatomy places many girls under the cumulative trauma of risking abandonment by the man they must marry. To avoid that, they must submit to painful and expensive surgery. They then go on to embark on a lifetime's relationship with a total stranger in an atmosphere of fraud, secrecy, and guilt.

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Digitizing Destiny

May 1985

One topic which never fails to rouse strong feelings in our local press is any challenging of the infallibility of astrology. An article I wrote based on material from the Astronomical Society of the Pacific was attacked on the charge that "Western science" does not apply to us, and those who think so exhibit a slavish mentality.

Once more, the final argument of the pundits is that the truth is hidden in the most ancient texts and that only scholars of Sanskrit and other dead languages can really understand it. Hindu astrology alone is absolutely reliable.

All arguments on this silly subject start with the profound statement, "Astrology is a science." Almost all Indian newspapers and periodicals carry astrology columns. The Indian Rationalist Association has tried in vain to persuade editors to stop the practice. Our protests have gone unheard and our letters have never been published.

Most editors agree that the astrological predictions are what make their publication sell. But there are also a small number of excellent papers which do not carry columns and have no problem with circulation.

Nevertheless, there are people who will buy five or six papers for these forecasts only. We also have a booming business in almanacs traditionally brought out from famous centers by Brahmin priests. These provide guidance for daily, hourly, and minute-by-minute routines on when to travel by train, when not to go east, west, north, or south, when to launch a new venture, and much else. It is said that the swearing-in of some of Rajiv Gandhi's cabinet ministers was delayed

because the time chosen was inauspicious for the gentlemen.

My next article will be on astrology and its significance in the government of this country.

I believe we have the only college of astrology in the world. It was inaugurated during the prime ministership of the superstitious Morarji Desai, better known for his positive views on urine therapy.

Most popular astrologers, writing in English, follow the Western system of signs. But the Hindu system, where signs are determined by the movement of the moon, is regarded as better for more detailed predictions. The moon takes two and a half days to transit each of the twelve signs; hence the exact time of birth is very important. Since this detail isn't available to newspaper astrologers obliged to forecast the same fate for thousands of readers under each birthsign, they also make predictions according to the first letter of people's names. For example, those born under Leo (*Sinh*) are likely to be given names beginning with *k*, *j*, *m*, and *l*.

Most papers, however, find it simpler to follow the Western system so that readers need only look up their birthdays and signs to know their fate for the coming week. One of our Sunday supplements carries a column by Peter Vidal from London. Readers are unaware that he is dead and that the forecasts are made in his name by a syndicate. I read somewhere that when the column failed to arrive on time on more than two occasions, junior reporters sat down and wrote up the forecasts.

Says one pundit: "Astrology is more than a science, because science is based on fixed data, while here, the subject goes beyond the laboratory and covers the general universe." This particular astrologer also writes very popular scripts for comic books.

Says another pundit, "Astrology is an open chart based totally on mathematical calculations. There is no suspense at all in it. It works like a computer."

According to a third astrologer, the allegation that it is unscientific and based only on "sixth sense," the "third eye," or "intuition" is false. "You are born at a particular moment, when the moon is in a certain sign. Counted from that, the transits, i.e., the planetary configurations, appearing in the Zodiac, are taken into account." This particular pundit has been doing newspaper columns for thirty-six years.

But if you ask these profound thinkers why forecasts differ so widely across the length and breadth of this country or why all of us can't master this "science," they begin to bemoan the host of charlatans in the business who are giving it a bad name. "Nobody goes into things in depth," says one.

The same priest who does the horoscopes, also performs ceremonies for birth, death, and marriages on the same day — for ten different families. Society is to blame for this. It doesn't recognize astrology as it used to do in ancient times. Newspaper forecasts are nothing but exploitation. Even twins born of one cell have differences in their horoscopes, how then can the same thing apply to all those born in one month? In olden days the horoscope was made according to the time of conception, because then even sex was indulged in according to the time of favourable stars. The right occasion would probably occur just once or twice a month. Naturally, the products of such unions were superior human beings. No wonder that, in ancient times, people were better, maybe illiterate, but at least they were obedient.

Well, now you know it: the present sad state of Indian astrology is due to uncontrolled and indiscriminate sexual activity without any respect for the stars!

It might be mentioned here that "stars" are not all those we see in the night sky, but only about twenty-eight — those within the stages of the moon.

There are some pundits who deny that astrology is a science. "The predictions are not made on scientific data," says one, "but on intuition. The ancient *rishis* (sages) had this gift and translated it into language for us. The practice of astrology helps deepen the astrologer's intuition."

Another very popular forecaster claims he takes four hours to work on each column, which is why he can guarantee you 70 percent success. "Destiny can't be changed, but I help you face it, like telling you it's going to rain anyway, so you better carry an umbrella." His contention is that astrology is not only intuition, it is poetry, it is art. "I play it very naturally. I float, maybe because I'm a poet."

It is this floater-cum-poet who has strongly denounced the arrival on the Indian astrology scene of two computer companies, both based in Bombay. You can get your total future worked out in fourteen minutes flat. There is no chance of human error on the more detailed calculations.

The owner of one company declares that the human astrologer is certainly best and that he doesn't want to confront tradition. So they will not give conclusions, only pure calculations in their readings. They will not try and play god.

The two companies are already denouncing each other as frauds,

with one accusing the other of having stolen its programs. "It is inferior to ours. I should know, I produced that program."

Predictions come out in Indian-English, but use traditional terminology like "You will have a lot of cows" which, in modern terms, means you will flourish. Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto are excluded, since the ancient astrologers were unaware of them. Besides, "other planets have had thousands of years of charting behind them."

Professional astrologers approach (the computer companies) with their predictions. If there is any divergence the man is made to see the error of his ways and goes off feeling foolish. Computers can't lie. "We've had astrologers coming to us from Delhi to settle disputes," says one manager. "As far as calculations go, the best astrologer can't compare with us. What we're saying is simple: Only God knows for sure. But we are among the people next to Him."

With that kind of sponsorship, digitalized forecasting is going to make serious inroads on traditional preserves and challenge the poets and intuitionists now earning their bread by making suckers of us. For the sake of novelty, a number of newspapers will soon start dishing up computerized forecasts. This will send a lot of respected sages into the wilderness.

What are the gravest charges against digitalized astrology?

It makes no allowance for essentially human factors like soul, presentiment, or intuition. One of the most widely read magazines published from Bangalore declares on its masthead: "Those who know astrology can only indicate in a way what will take place in the future. Who else, except the Creator Brahma, can say with certainty what will definitely happen?"

The publisher of this magazine was once challenged by the rationalists to demonstrate his craft at a public meeting at which he would read the fate of a number of unknown people from their palm prints. A considerable crowd assembled, keen to see the astrologer triumph. He didn't show up.

Most astrologers who otherwise insist forecasting is scientific will blame errors on faulty data about birth times, or the intervention of some unseen element. To make doubly certain, most also use numerology, palmistry, signs, and omens, along with planetary positions. All this puts a computer at a disadvantage. A mere machine can't cultivate intuition. It can't scan a client's palm. It knows nothing about I-Ching, tarot cards, dreams, signs, and omens, or even the actual time at which the question is asked (horary astrology).

A computer doesn't understand human psychology. It doesn't have

the human ability to touch, soothe, and reassure the person in distress. It can't talk smoothly. It can't con people into feeling good about being told what they want to hear. It is faceless. It is unresponsive. It is cold. As an off-shoot of technology, it has no soul.

"In India at least," declares the poet-cum-conman who functions largely on intuition,

> the astrologer is the therapist. While there are a few bad eggs, there are quite a few astrologers not lacking in integrity, understanding, patience, knowledge, skills and basic psychology, out to heal, and many times succeeding in this mission. *Jyotishi* (Astrology) means the light of God and for that we need the divine element, and that, surely, cannot be supplied by the computer. The reading, therefore, cannot be totally fulfilling from the human viewpoint.

In other words, brother, there are more ways than one of parting fools from their money. And who should know better than old pros like us?

On a visit to India, Dr. Von Daniken addressed a press conference in Calcutta and declared the confident hope that

> the time has come for the gods to revisit the earth and, given the rate of technological advancement, I hope we will be able to contact extra-terrestrial beings within 50 years.

In their tryst with ETs, humans would now play the role of gods and elevate the cretures of other planets to a superior form through genetic mutation. He also said that those who attack his hypothesis saying that if there had been visitors from outer space they would have returned by now "do not take into account the most important conclusion of Einstein's special theory of relativity."

> If gods now plan to come to the earth, they will have to board a very, very high-speed vehicle Now Einstein's theory says that for such a vehicle time slows down, meaning the passage of a few

moments in that carriage will be equivalent to several years on earth. Maybe for this reason we do not see gods descending on this planet as and when we please.

But why should the gods want to come here at all? "The urge to propogate intelligence might have prompted them to visit this planet," said Dr. Von Daniken. "I'll buy that!"

A unique bank has been established in the holy city of Benares (Varanasi), where every stone is said to have the name of god inscribed on it. This is the Ram Nam Pati Bank, rather like a "Hail Mary" Bank. It doesn't accept money deposits, only slips of paper with the name of Ram written on them. These are deposited in the name of the believer. You can draw on this bank for as many times you need to repeat the name of god. You cash a cheque and receive that many slips inscribed with the name of the god Ram, just as you might need a number of "Hail Marys" to do penance.

The more slips you deposit with the name of Ram the greater merit you accumulate on your karmic account.

King-Makers, King-Breakers

June 1985

For the purpose of forecasting the destiny of a country, astrologers make use of mundane astrology. In India it is a very ancient subject, since soothsayers were always part of a king's court. Regarded with superstitious awe, they were rewarded and feared. They still are.

The king, who usually belonged to the warrior caste, had for his chief adviser a Brahmin who also officiated as priest and astrologer. Since all predictions are made on the assumption that the time and date of birth foreshadows one's destiny and since it isn't always possible to fix the birth date of a nation, the king's stars were consulted to reveal the kingdom's destiny.

A Country's Horoscope

When India attained independence from British rule in 1947, astrologers fixed on the midnight hour of August 14 as the most auspicious, so that a golden age would dawn on our Independence Day, August 15. The event was heralded by a bloodbath in the form of Hindu-Muslim riots. Perhaps the best thing this auspicious moment of birth achieved was to provide Collins and Lapierre a fine-sounding title for their book of historical fiction, *Freedom at Midnight*.

Somehow, astrologers of today have short memories. I have read forecasts for the country in which the salient feature in India's horoscope is given as Taurus ascendant with Dragon's Head (Rahu) and Moon in Cancer. The Dragon's Head accounted for the communal killings at the time of Partition. And furthermore — the presence of the

Dragon's Tail indicates the persistence of disruptive and divisionary forces! It would appear that the soothsayers who kept us all awake well past the midnight hour on August 1947 didn't know their stuff.

Astrologers-cum-magicians are still very much at the center of our country's political destiny. They haunt the corridors of power in Delhi and in state capitals. They are known to wield enormous influence by holding in thrall the men of straw who head government departments. It is a common thing for the signing of pacts, treaties, and agreements to be delayed until the minister concerned gets a green signal from his astrologer. It seems the landing of Queen Elizabeth's plane was delayed at Delhi because pundits said the noon hour was not propitious. Cabinet changes and swearing-in ceremonies are said to be astrologically fixed.

Nirad Chadhuri, in his book *The Continent of Circe*, says:

> The occult in the backshop of the Government of India is a terrifying spectacle. A legion of astrologers and charlatans are making a comfortable living as consultants of ministers, officials, and politicians. I also hear of homeopathic magic for or against certain political cliques or politicians, for example, of the repetition of the *Bagalamukhi mantra*, a spell for the general discomfiture of all enemies, known and unknown, at various places in Delhi, in the interest of this or that minister.

In 1964, when Nehru suffered a severe stroke in the closing weeks of his life, newspapers reported that a *tantric* (magical) rite for his death was being performed by a certain minister in a temple of the goddess Kali. The matter was considered serious enough to be raised in a state assembly and strongly condemned. The rumor was unfounded, but people believed it nonetheless.

As the ailing leader began losing his grip on life, however, a secret life-saving *tantric* rite *was* conducted in the famous Kali temple near Delhi. It extended from January 26 to April 2 and involved repeating the *maha-mrityunjaya* mantra (the great death-conquering spell) no less than twenty-five thousand times to the accompaniment of fire-sacrifices. Twenty-five priests, sworn to secrecy, performed the rite for a fee. The magic of this spell lies in five meaningless syllables: *om*, *haum*, *om*, *jum*, *sah*. Nehru died the following month.

Such fee-fi-fo-fum is part and parcel of astrology. It also uses other crafts like palmistry, numerology, signs and omens, visions and dreams, on-the-spot planetary positions, Tarot cards, and even I-Ching.

Desai's Soothsayer

A soothsayer in residence in Delhi during the brief circus staged by the Janata government of 1977 (headed by the piss-drinking Morarji Desai) was a man from Gujarat, a *tantric* called Pravin Jivanlal Talati. Witchcraft, divination, exorcism, and other sorceries is also used by tantrics (magicians).

Hindsight

It is quite common for our astrologers to predict a leader's defeat at the polls or death by accident or bomb blast. After Sanjay Gandhi, Mrs. Gandhi's younger son, died in a plane crash, umpteen astrologers reminded the public they'd known it would happen. It is now several months since Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated, and, with their remarkable hindsight, any number of soothsayers will declare they knew that was also going to happen.

Indians love politics, so any astrologer worth his salt has to be into political forecasting. I collect clippings and enjoy a good chuckle, also using hindsight. A year ago, all were predicting "bad periods" for Mrs. Gandhi, a prediction which even a child could have made.

According to one astrologer who threw his mind forward in April 1984: "Mrs. Gandhi is Kark (Cancer) and so the troubles are there. Till February, 1985, the period is not good. She might win the elections and yet find herself out of power." (Her party won the elections, and she *is* out of power!)

On Rajiv Gandhi: "I have no prejudice against Rajiv Gandhi — but he will never be prime minister."

On Reagan: "Even if he contests again and wins, he will not complete the second term. This is true of Mrs. Thatcher, too."

On a Black becoming a U.S. President (This should really interest readers:) "Libra is rising and in Libra there is Saturn, and since Saturn is a commoner, and a black is a commoner, there is a *goodly goodly* chance for a black to become president."

Iran-Iraq War: "The war will end [at the] earliest May 6, or at latest September 23, 1984."

How does this fraud justify his poor rating? "Astrologers are not God," says he. His hits he ascribes to the "grace of God," and every miss to the possibility that it is not in *his* stars! "You see, we too have our horoscopes!"

He disdains holy ash, saffron robes, and beads, but goes for safari suits. His style is unique: for twenty-seven minutes every day, his psyche goes into a sudden tailspin, revving up his pulse. Charged with psychic power (*shakti*) he cries, "My pulse is throbbing! My pulse is throbbing! Ask! Ask!" Any question asked at that precise moment will reveal the future correctly.

He says he's been keeping a log of his predictions since 1978 and has scored 810 out of 1000. The misses were because God didn't wish it.

Talati brought about Arafat's defeat in Beirut by performing a *maran* (destructive) magical rite. It was on his advice that Jerry Ford packed his bags and got ready to quit the White House long before the presidential election results were announced. Talati made a great deal of money during the rule of the Janata government. It was his magic which held the many factions together for so long. He performed a rite to send one of the leaders to a hospital, then relented, and performed another to make him prime minister — that was Charan Singh, who lasted forty-five days in office. Even this quick exit was effected by Talati performing counter-magic on behalf of a rival. He wasn't over-harsh on Charan Singh, says Talati. He could have performed *maran prayog* (death rite) and killed him off altogether.

The *maran prayog* is frequently used by politicians in their power games. Talati claims it was performed by someone to bring about Sanjay Gandhi's death. He ascribes Mrs. Gandhi's trouble to the fact that from November 1983, some *tantric* rites were being performed against her. (Perhaps by himself?)

On Reagan: "President Reagan will not be the next president. This is my greatest prediction in the world."

Swami Sadachari, facing charges of kidnapping a young woman, was introduced into the Delhi goon show by a benighted chief minister of our most backward state of Bihar. Sadachari has been operating from inside since 1968. What's his score?

He converted Brezhnev from Atheism to a belief in god with "magical events" which occurred in the fifteen minutes in which he met the Russian leader visiting India. Brezhnev then invited the swami to Russia, where he initiated five Russian girls in *tantric* rituals. This he did simply with a touch, with *shakti* flowing through to them. These girls are now creating "a storm in Moscow" with more and more falling under their spell.

Sadachari is a close family friend of the Thatchers! It was he who advised her to go for a mid-term poll when she sent out a special envoy to consult him. He then went to 10 Downing Street and conducted a

special magical rite to help her win the election. "They call it praying there," he explains. "It went on for three days."

Now I'm sure you could read funnier jokes elsewhere, but I'm writing this rot to demonstrate how the credulous are influenced by such frauds. Their influence has sinister implications for the country. They can make and unmake governments. But they are more active in places where they function as liaison men between foreign firms, business houses, and arms manufacturers and the government officials who believe in their magic. They also operate as moles for foreign spy agencies.

Most Hindus, even prominent scientists, believe in astral control of their destinies. Many Indians of other religions also go in for horoscopy and other forms of future-casting. In many Hindu households you will always find some kind of astrological almanac. The best-known are prepared by Brahmins from traditional centers. They also enjoy a booming market abroad.

On A Certain Day

What are the kind of rules laid down in these almanacs? Nirad Chaudhuri in his book, *Hinduism*, selects random samples for just one day, April 14, 1969. This was also the first day of the Bengali year 1376. The planetary positions are given in detail and the class to which a person belongs if born on this day. Thereafter all suspicious and inauspicious times of the day are specified.

Food taboos are listed: eggplants cannot be eaten till 11 hours, 43 minutes and 2 seconds at night. After that period, a particular kind of *pulse* (a seed mixture) is taboo; so also are women, oil, fish, and meat. Nor can penances be undertaken.

Traveling is permissible but not toward the east or south. After 4 hours, 48 minutes, 58 seconds, only east is forbidden. But after 8 hours, 7 minutes, 2 seconds, south is again forbidden.

Paddy (rice) cannot be cut on this particular day, but boat journeys, commercial transactions, the making of idols and gods, preparing and taking medicines, sowing seeds, planting trees, and taking and giving loans must all be done before 4 hours, 48 minutes, 58 seconds in the afternoon.

For commencing new ventures, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday are auspicious. In this particular almanac, writes Chadhuri, it is laid down that

Tuesdays are propitious for theft; and that for riding an elephant or a horse for the first time, Saturdays are auspicious. But again, certain hours of the day, otherwise good, may have certain times when action is harmful. This is particularly true of the afternoon of Thursday.

In Search of Father

It is hardly surprising that a nation of people who are conditioned from childhood through fear and a belief in karmic inevitability so readily fall under the spell of those who appear to be sitting over a box of tricks, and who can magically change things with a wave of their wand or the uttering of a magic switch-word.

Fatalism is a negation of human freedom. It not only saps one's courage, it promotes the idea that to be moral is to be passively obedient to even the most irrational and extreme superstitions. And this belief absolves one of the intolerable burden of taking responsibility for one's own actions. Failure is always blamed on bad luck.

Says one perceptive Indian psychotherapist, in many Indians, "The world of magic and animistic ways of thinking lies very close to the surface." As a result, the Indian grasp on reality is "relatively tenuous." V. S. Naipaul quotes Dr. Sudhir Kakar in his book *India: A Wounded Civilization*:

> Generally among Indians there seems to be a different relationship to outside reality, compared with one found in the West. In India it is closer to a certain stage in childhood when outer objects did not have a separate, independent existence, but were intimately related to the self and its affective states. They were not something in their own right, but were good or bad, threatening or rewarding, helpful or cruel, all depending on the person's feelings of the moment.

The detailed social organization of Indian life results in an underdeveloped ego. When such men are given power, individual observation and judgment being absent, they find it safer to entrust responsibility to some father figure, guru, godman, conman, astrologer, king-maker, or king-breaker.

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The Tears of *Rudra*

July 1985

Most Westerners are by now familiar with the distinguishing marks of Hindu ascetics, godmen, and the members of their cults: orange robes, symbolical marks on forehead and upper arms, or maybe a piece of string round the torso, and a necklace of chunky beads — a rosary — which is what I write about here.

Actually, those aren't beads but are seeds which come from the sacred rudraksha tree (*elaeocarpus ganitrus*). The pious regard this tree as a symbolic link between heaven, earth, and the underworld of spirits and deities.

According to one very ancient text, the seeds are tears of the god Rudra, the Aryan deity of storms. Emerging from a period of meditation in a somewhat lachrymose mood, Rudra wept and was so impressed by the beauty of his tears that he transformed them into seeds and gave them to the four Hindu castes. Later, he traveled to all the holy places and planted trees to bear more seeds for the faithful.

Rudra finally lost his separate identity and came to be associated with the god Shiva who is still among us, worshipped in the form of the *lingam* or phallus. His devotees, called Shaivites, use the necklace of seeds as a rosary in his worship. Some believe that *rudraksha* refers to the "urethral means through which the Lord Shiva usually ejects his seed amassed during the period of long and severe austerities undertaken on behalf of the world." In fact, a single-faced, or one-sided seed — rarely found — is regarded as an incarnation of Shiva himself.

Only Three

Only a fortunate few are gifted with such a seed because the god ejaculates precisely three a year. Of these, he gives one to his most "celebrated devotee," a second to some political leader, and the third he keeps for himself. People possessing these wrap them in gold leaf and pass them on as heirlooms. Indira Gandhi is said to have owned one. Its possession carries many fringe benefits because the goddess of wealth liberally showers her gifts on the owner.

Mrs. Gandhi often wore a *rudraksha* necklace and placed great faith in it. According to one news story, it broke during the 1977 general election, and she was sure nothing good would ever come of it. Of course, she lost power as prime minister and was even trounced during the elections in her own constituency. When her body was laid out for the final rites of cremation, the necklace was placed around her neck.

Cure-All

According to ancient texts, the *rudraksha* rosary is the most potent item a worshipper can possess. It is "the cause of firmness of all without exception," "the driver of evil spirits," and, as a "form of the Knowledge of Brahma," gives "protection unto all the worlds," "creates all things," sees to it that the night follows the day, the moon and stars follow the sun, and makes "multitudinous streams to flow along their wonted course" to make it safe to travel not only from place to place but from one world to another.

Hindu scriptures distinguish among thirty-eight different kinds of *rudraksha* seeds on a basis of their faces or sides. They are full of magic and can achieve anything for the possessor from attaining salvation to curing scorpion bites.

The two-sided *rudraksha* seed symbolizes the androgynous nature of god who has both masculine and feminine qualities. In images, this he-she principle is depicted by the form of Shiva fusing into the form of his consort Parvathi. More mundanely, the possession of this kind of seed endows a person with magical power and can free anyone from punishment for having killed a cow.

The four-faced *rudraksha*, if worn in a necklace of twenty-one beads, can fascinate anyone of the opposite sex when charged by the following mantra: *Om chamunde hulu chulu chulu vash manya mukim svaha. Om chamunde jay jambhe mohay vash manya mukim svaha*!

A five-faced seed, standing for the five faces of Shiva, can help its

possessor to achieve salvation by breaking the chain of existences. It is also good as a charm against scorpion bite.

Businessmen are advised to keep a six-sided seed on their persons for success. This stands for the Hindu god of war. One text declares, "He who wears it on the right arm is even absolved from the sin of killing a Brahmin." (As members of the priestly caste, Brahmins are at the top of the pecking order. In earlier times, they alone read and interpreted the scriptures. Their absolute domination of Hindu society raised them to the status of gods. Brahminicide was a very heinous crime.)

A seven-sided seed attached to a man's gaiters makes him immune to any attack by a lethal weapon. An eight-faced *rudraksha* ensures success in love, trade, and gambling. It also gives the possessor control over ghosts and spirits.

> Holding this frees one from the sin of having illicit contact with a woman of bad family or with the wife of one's guru, and other sins as well. It also enables one to acquire heaps of food, cotton, and gold, and in the end the Highest Place is attained.

Each of the four Hindu castes is assigned a particular colour of *rudraksha* seed — white for Brahmins, red for the warrior caste of Kshatriyas, yellow for the Vaishya caste of merchants and traders, and black for the menial Shudras.

The most auspicious time for wearing the *rudraksha* rosary is during lunar or solar eclipses, and on the day of a full moon or new moon. At such time, the wearer must avoid liquor, garlic, onions, meat or eggs, horseradish, and other sexually stimulating foods.

Karmic Accounts

For the Hindu, the *rudraksha* rosary is regarded as the most potent amulet against disease, ill-luck, and accident. Says one scriptual text:

> By being worn by the devotee it will remove all sins committed by day and by night. By looking at it, religious merit will be attained a hundred thousand fold, and by wearing ten thousand fold. By uttering prayers with its help and by wearing it, a man will attain religious merit to the tune of a *lakh* of *crores* of thousands, and a *lakh* of *crores* of hundreds respectively. . . .

Indeed, the total chalked up on one's karmic account would be of

enormous significance when calculating credit and debit in the cycle of existences. Such great promise is not to be sniffed at when one knows that a *lakh* equals 100,000 and a *crore* is equal to 10,000,000.

Jainism

August 1985

Like the Roman Catholic Church in Europe, Hinduism was also confronted by heretical creeds which broke away and became distinct religious sects. The earliest heretics were Indian Atheists in the sixth and seventh century B.C. They regarded physical sense data as the only source of knowledge and challenged Hindu metaphysics. They believed in pure materialism and declared the Vedas and other scriptures as "the idle prating of knaves, characterized by the three faults of untruthfulness, internal contradiction, and useless repetition."

The Brahmin priestly caste hated them because they denounced the mindless rituals and sacrifices which earned them a livelihood. As a result, all the early writings of the Atheists were destroyed. Whatever has come down to us is found in sneering quotations in religious texts.

Two other reform movements had better success and survive today as established religions — Buddhism and Jainism. The founders were not Brahmins but from the Kshatriya warrior caste. They were influenced by Atheist thought, for both spoke against the Vedas (the four holy books on which Hinduism is founded), denounced ritualism, and rejected the Hindu caste system. They declared that there is no god and each must work for his own salvation. But that was as far as their Atheism went.

Today Janism is as ritualistic and priest-ridden as Hinduism. The community numbers about seven million. Jain's ideas were already extant in the seventh century B.C. with twenty-four teachers preceding the saint Mahavira, who organized these ideas into a composite body of belief in the sixth century. The name Jain comes from the word *Jina*,

meaning "conqueror."

Renouncing the world at age thirty, Mahavira made the customary journey in search of Truth, which all oriental mystics must make. When he achieved enlightenment, under an asoka tree, he stripped off his clothes, plucked out his hairs one by one, and turned ascetic.

Self-Violence

Mahavira's ability to endure pain set the tone for time to come. Jainism is therefore the most pessimistic and life-negating of all Indian religions. It sanctions extreme self-violence in rigorous forms of piety to achieve liberation from rebirth, even while enjoining absolute non-violence as one of its precepts.

According to one legend, Mahavira was sitting on a thorn bush and meditating when someone tried to draw away half a garment given him by a god, but he remained undisturbed. Another time, a herdsman drove nails into his ears and scorched his feet, but failed to rouse him. Suspecting him to be a cattle-rustler, another herdsman twisted his neck — but Mahavira remained comatose.

The Jain belief in nonviolence supports the idea that everything has life and soul — fleas, trees, mice, and men. Swallowing a midge, even by mistake, is tantamount to murder. Certain Jains sweep the ground ahead as they walk and wear masks over their mouths and noses.

Logically, the safest way to be a good Jain is to sit very still in one place and fast — liberation will follow soon enough. Even vegetarianism poses hazards. Roots and tubers are out, since ants and worms might get killed while one is pulling them from the ground. Water must be filtered, and meals must be eaten before sunset to avoid swallowing tiny insects which swarm around lights after dark.

All living things are called *jiva*, and all have sense. One sense is ascribed to a tree, two to the earthworm, three to an ant, four to insects, and five to animals and humans.

Nonviolence ruled out agriculture, crafts, fishing, hunting, and similar professions for Jains. Today they are found chiefly in commerce as traders, middlemen, and moneylenders. The restriction on possessions and private property along with detachment does not preclude amassing money, and Jains are among India's richest industrialists and businessmen — particularly in western India.

Keeping Karma Clean

Even though every living substance (*jiva*) comes in with "infinite knowledge, power, and bliss," there is very little hope for the faint-hearted. A *jiva* is entangled for countless existences in the Wheel of Birth and Death. The problem is "karma matter." This is distinct from the kind of karma in which one's actions attract merit and demerit in each life — which is also part of Jain belief. But karma poses peculiar problems for Jains who see it as imperceptible particles which stick to the *jiva* "as soot to an object." As a contagion, karma matter even "flows into the soul as waters rush into a pond from all channels."

Anger, pride, or deceit makes karmic matter "adhere to the *jiva* just as heat will unite with iron." Once it invades the system, karma begins to generate eight other kinds of karma.

But it is possible to stop fresh karmic matter from entering the system by caulking the seams through severe penance, rigorous piety, and self-torture. This is so difficult that few can hope to succeed. Further information can be prevented by practicing self-control and detachment from the world. This latter involves taking certain vows; being careful when speaking, walking, or laying down things (out of respect for ants and insects); and in sexual abstinence and meditation.

There remains the need to then rid oneself from all accumulated karmic matter, past and present, through blazing austerities and the most extreme physical torment as penance.

> The soul which was until now bedimmed by the dust of karma matter will shine like a mirror as soon as the dust has been wiped off. Then it will revert to its pure transcendental form and attain *moksha* [salvation].

It is common practice for Jain holy men to commit slow suicide by starvation when they attain a great age.

Sacred Nudity

After Mahavira's death, the community split into two — the Shvetambara, in which the monks are "white-clad," and the more orthodox Digambara sect in which they are "sky-clad," meaning nude. For reasons of modesty, nudity cannot be adopted by women who become nuns, so they will never attain salvation — though they might

practice every austerity. This blatant double standard has not deterred women from joining monastic orders.

We Indians make a distinction between nudity which is sacred and sanctioned by religion and the more vulgar secular sort of nakedness. Stark-naked holy men often saunter through our city streets and are accepted as amusing curiosities. The other day, six sky-clad monks went past our front gate as naturally as the sunlight. That same week, our local daily carried a news story of a demented middle-aged man who roams about a particular neighbourhood naked, causing much embarassment to women and girls who pass him. The reporter urged that the authorities do something about this obscene and disgusting display by having the man committed.

The world's largest nude sculpture is of a Jain saint, carved in granite on the Mysore plateau in Karnataka state. It is 525 bows in height (equal to the height of thirteen men) and represents Bahubali, a prince who is regarded as equal to the early Jain saints because he was the first to attain *moksha* (salvation) in this present cosmic cycle of time. He achieved this by turning ascetic, plucking out his hair, and assuming the standing posture of a Jain in total meditation. Creepers wound themselves around his arms and legs, ants raised their mounds at his feet, and serpents emerged. Birds nested in his matted hair and beard, but he remained unmoved and unshaken.

In February 1981, the one-thousandth anniversary of the consecration of this massive statue was observed. Thousands of pilgrims flocked to the place, and 1,008 large vessels of milk, clarified butter, saffron, and other libations were emptied on it from a platform erected behind it. These pots were auctioned to devotees for prices ranging from 500 rupees to a 100,000 rupees. A helicopter showered flower petals from the air. Millions of rupees were spent on yet another of those spectacular rites so common in a country where enormous quantities of food are wasted, while millions aren't yet assured of one simple meal a day.

Nonabsolute NonViolence

One might think the Jain emphasis on absolute nonviolence would place the community in the forefront of pacifist groups in times of war or as articulate critics of the inter-religious riots so common in Indian society. But principle and practice lie poles apart, and Jains themselves are not even above breaking each other's heads in religious disputes.

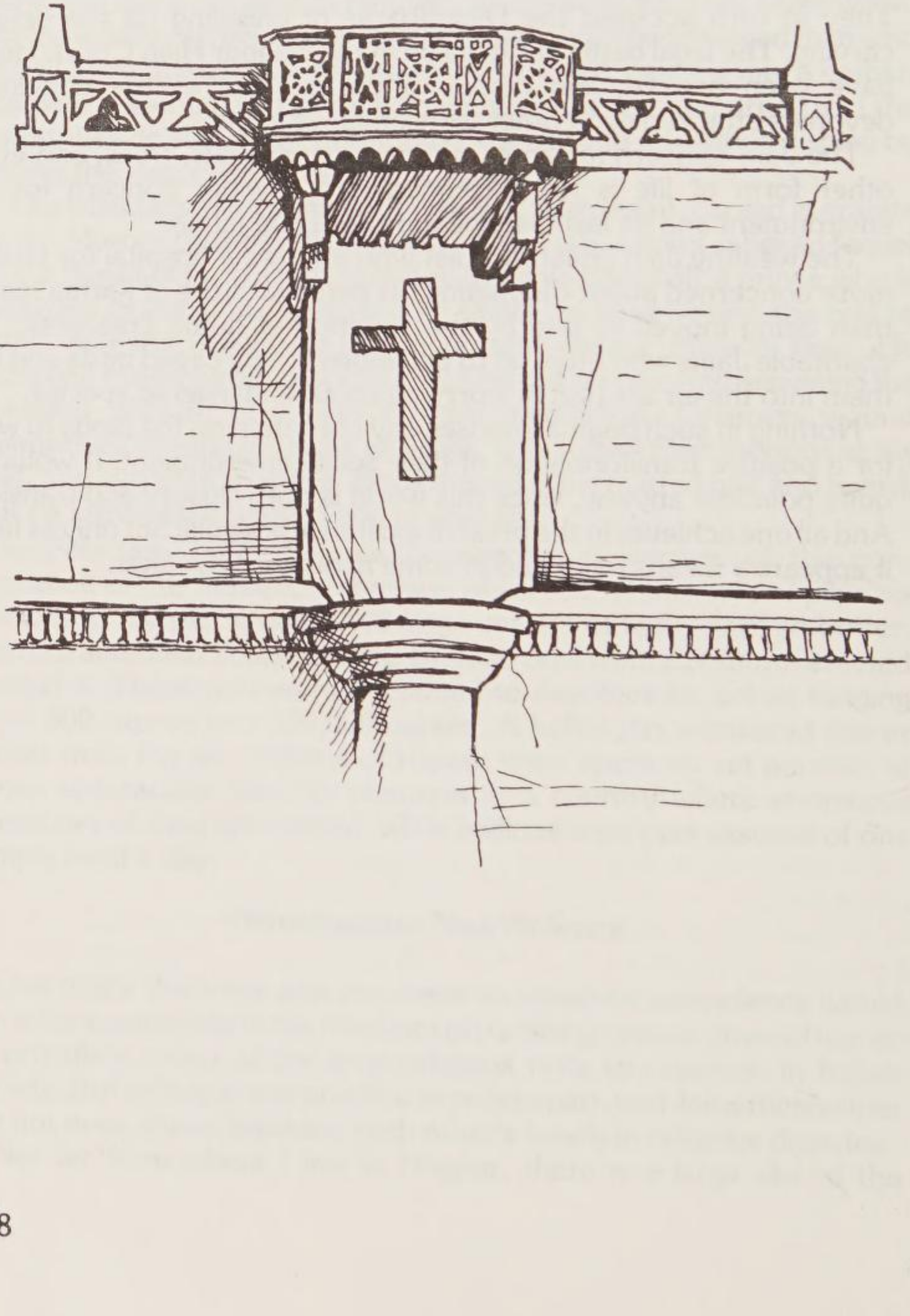
Not far from where I live in Nagpur, there is a large idol of the

twenty-third of the twenty-four saints revered before Mahavira appeared. The two Jain sects worship the idol under the watchful eye of the police, each at different times to avoid bloody clashes. The Digambara Jains believe the idol should be absolutely nude. The Shvetambaras want to see it wearing a waist band, a loin cloth, crown, and jewels. Each sect claims ownership since 1908. When the idol was replastered, the Digambaras accused the others of embellishing it. They in turn accused the Digambaras of chiseling off the original carving. The legal battle still goes on in the Nagpur High Court. Heads have been broken, and curfew often imposed as the nonviolent devotees attacked each other with lethal weapons.

The Jain concern for ants, earthworms, animals, trees, and every other form of life is not extended into a wider concern for the environment and its fast-disappearing flora and fauna.

The wealthy Jain philanthropist who endows a hospital for birds is more concerned about dissipating his personal store of karma matter than being moved to pity by the suffering of dumb creatures. The charitable Jains who often go to pet shops to buy caged birds and free them into the air are hardly worrying about endangered species.

Nothing in such dogma imposes any obligation on the pious to work for a positive transformation of their social environment. It would be quite pointless anyway, since this world is both illusory and transient. And all one achieves in the present existence is significant only as far as it appears a means to an end in some nebulous Hereafter.



A Skeleton in The Cupboard

September 1985

Every ten years, pious Roman Catholics from all over the country and abroad converge on the former Portuguese enclave of Goa for an important event — the exposition of St. Francis Xavier. The most recent one ended on January 13 of this year, when the mortal remains of the saint were taken from the See Cathedral back to their usual resting-place in the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Old Goa. Over 1,100,000 came to pay homage and participate in this ghoulish event of venerating the mummified remains of one whose body has not seen corruption like more ordinary mortals. There is, however, evidence that this incorruptibility is not because of divine intervention, but because of a confidence trick played by the Roman Catholic Church on the devout. The corpse which has been displayed so often as St. Xavier is not his after all.

The Catholicization of Goa

Goa was conquered in the early sixteenth century by Alfonso de Albuquerque. When he held a victory parade to celebrate the event, it was November 25, 1510, the feast-day of St. Catherine of Alexandria. He therefore made her the territory's patron saint and ordered the construction of the first cathedral in her honour. Thereafter, the conversion of the heathen went vigorously ahead to turn them from their own kind of idolatry to that of the Roman Catholic sort. In 1540, the Portuguese government ordered Hindu temples and Muslim shrines to be razed and churches and cathedrals built on their

foundations. In 1560, the Inquisition was brought in to terrorize those who drifted away or tended to revert to their pagan ways.

Enter Francis Xavier

After Catherine, the next most honoured saint in Goa is Francis Xavier (1506-52), the "apostle of the Indies." Born at Xavero, son of a privy councilor to the King of Navarre, Xavier was reared in the lap of luxury. He was educated in Paris and became a lecturer at the College de Beauvais. Greatly influenced by Ignatius Loyola, he later worked with him in founding the Society of Jesus in 1534.

At the age of thirty-one, Xavier was ordained and summoned to Rome by Loyola to serve as secretary to the Jesuits. Turning missionary, he set out eastwards, landing in Goa in 1542 to found the first Jesuit mission. Later, he traveled through India and went to the Far East — to Malacca, the Molucas, and to Japan. Accompanied by a Japanese convert, Yajira, he penetrated remote regions in Japan and spent two years preaching and converting. He intended to go to China next but died of a fever on an island near Macao on December 2, 1552. Two years later, his body was brought to Goa and placed in a silver casket fashioned by local craftsmen. It was said to be as fresh as the day he died. Xavier was canonized in 1622, and his resting-place in Old Goa is the most celebrated shrine among the many beautiful churches and cathedrals which dot the countryside of this lush and verdant coastal region.

The Basilica of Bom Jesus is a single-naved shrine with a cruciform plan and a classical three-story facade. Xavier's mausoleum is in the southern wing of the transept. The tomb was made in Florence. The interior of the chapel is garish, with a great deal of gilt and glitter, woodcarvings, and paintings. It is connected by a corridor to the vestry which has more paintings, a collection of human bones of various shapes and sizes, and other magically endowed knick-knacks. My own impression of the Basilica was one of a morbid and over-explicit obsession with death. Here, too, is found the Golden Rose presented to the Basilica by Pope Pius XII in 1953. At each exposition, the remains of the saint are decked in vestments and taken in procession to the See Cathedral to be returned after fifty-four days.

Cutting up The Remains

As soon as Xavier's corpse arrived in Goa, superstitious people

sliced off pieces of flesh as relics. In 1614, the Roman Catholic Church took off his right arm and parceled it to Rome. In 1626, the body was further scavenged when all his innards were removed and distributed to Roman Catholic centers round the world. He'll have quite a time gathering himself when the last Trumpet sounds.

Evidently, Xavier didn't cease from his labours even while lying in his silver casket, obviously dead but well-preserved and standing up very well to the ravages of a tropical climate. When, in 1683, Goa was threatened by Maratha soldiers of a neighbouring Hindu ruler, the Portuguese viceroy was unable to think of any way to save the colony. He finally went to the Bom Jesus Basilica and placed his jeweled rod of office and letters of appointment in Xavier's remaining hand, deputing him viceroy in the hope that he would get the enemy to raise the siege. Despite being not all there, Xavier acted promptly. With a fine sense of timing, he induced the Mughal army to threaten the Marathas from the rear, and they hurriedly abandoned Goa and retreated.

The myth still persists that as long as Xavier is present, Goa is under divine protection. But he submitted the enclave to the Indian take-over in 1961 and didn't lift a finger of his remaining hand to stop their marching in, watched with mixed feelings by the Portuguese colonists and a staunchly Roman Catholic Goan population, but welcomed by the local Hindus.

After 1683, it became the convention for the retiring viceroy to place his baton in the saint's hand to be delivered by the mummified corpse to the succeeding viceroy. But each time the casket was opened, a little more of the poor, unprotesting saint disappeared. Finally, the Jesuit Superior-General in Rome gave an order that the casket should never be opened again. This ban was violated in 1744 and 1751 and again in 1755. On one occasion, Dom Jose, the King of Portugal, even tried to get possession of the body from the Jesuits. Politically powerful groups in Portugal decided that the Jesuits in the colony had acquired too much wealth and influence and they were ordered to leave Goa. Soon after their expulsion, the mortal remains of Xavier disappeared in the mists of history.

A Substitute for The Real

The populace, however, was furious at the loss of their mascot. To placate them the Portuguese Episcopal authorities were forced to find another corpse. A Goan churchman, Canon Antonio Gomes, obligingly died at this time and was put in Xavier's place. At the

exposition of 1782, his corpse, gorgeously decked, was put on show for the devout to venerate. Pieces of his *soutanes* (cassock) were sold in small squares as scapulars.

Gomes's body didn't keep as good health as Xavier's. Back in 1654, a French Jesuit, Bayard, described the century-old corpse of the saint thusly:

> The Saint's hair is slightly black and curling. The forehead is broad and high, with two rather large veins, soft and purple in tint. The eyes are black, lively and sweet, with so penetrating a glance that he would seem to be alive and breathing. The lips are of bright reddish colour, and the beard is thick. In the cheeks there is a vermilion tint. The tongue is flexible, red and moist, and the chin beautifully proportioned.

The Chinese knew their embalming.

Not all that paint and cosmetics could give Gomes's corpse a similar credibility. In time, church officials discreetly referred to the remains not as "the body incorruptible," but merely as "sacred relics."

For generations, the Gomes family kept the bizarre secret, fearing the wrath of the church if they spoke out. But in 1952, they demanded the remains of their ancestor for proper burial in the family mausoleum in Cavelossim. On their petition, the Patriarch of Goa had the corpse examined and under the vestments were found a skeleton, skull, and small pieces of skin with hair. But the secret was still kept.

In 1961, when Indian troops were poised for the invasion of the Portuguese colony, Salazar of Portugal ordered the silver casket and its contents to be flown out from Goa. But Roman Catholic Church officials enlightened the secret police who went to the Basilica to carry out the dictator's commands. The fleeing governor, however, made sure to take the gem-studded baton of office when he left the territory.

In 1974, the Apostolic Administrator, Monsignor Raul Gonsalves, said of the poor remains, "We can no longer speak of incorruptibility, for what we have left is mainly bones." But he did not think it necessary to specify whose bones they are.

As Always — The Fraud

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church continues to perpetuate a fraud on gullible believers, and the thousands of pilgrims bring in a lot of money to the coffers. But even if the truth were told, it is unlikely to

shake anyone's faith. There aren't many who can smell or tell the difference between the bones of two dead men. We now know that the Pope is to visit Goa in February of 1986. He can't possibly miss out on a trip to the Basilica to call on "St. Xavier" (or his stand-in, Gomes). Maybe for him there'll be a special exposition. I doubt whether, with all his infallibility, he'll be much wiser than the rest about what he really sees in those ghoulish remains.

Allah in The Dock

October 1985

Every country has its laws of censorship — some more benighted, and others differing only in degree. No matter how rational these laws appear on paper, no government has yet devised their rational application. Censors anywhere in the world are a strange breed. Our Customs Act gives the government powers to ban, absolutely or partially, any foreign publication which goes against the security of India, the maintenance of law and order, friendly relations with other countries, communal harmony, and standards of decency and morality in order to prevent the contravention of any law in force and for any other purpose conducive to the interests of the general public. All this to see that we remain tolerant, patriotic, and pure in our thinking.

Within the country, state governments have examiners who scan publications and ban them if necessary. These usually include works of authors who refuse to toe the official line. It is also the censor's duty to see that we do not have access to literature which might work us into a communal frenzy. A ban can also be imposed on writing which is likely to hurt the feelings of a particular community. Recently, the Maharastra state government banned a book by an Indian author on the Aga Khans. It told of the beginnings of this family from a small, petty Afghan chieftain, something of a freebooter, who wheedled a pension from the British and then went on to found his fortunes by exploiting his followers. Now, every gossip column in the Western press must have featured the fast life of this line of semi-divine tycoons, but the government did not want to have the feelings of the Khoja Muslim sect hurt by its publication in a book.

When *Time-Life* publications' "Great Cities" series brought out *Bombay* there were protests by certain sections of citizens that they had been misrepresented by the author of the text. One political group burned a copy after a noisy demonstration. Certain orthodox Parsis objected to references to their custom of exposing their dead. When I bought the book, I was disgusted to find that some witless creature had been made to sit down with a felt pen and ink over the offending references. A photograph showing attendants carrying a corpse into a Tower of Silence was also inked out, along with part of the caption saying it would be placed on a platform, "there to await the attention of the vultures." The paper has now, however, absorbed the ink and the print is clearly readable through it. A portion of the blacked out text tells of the controversy within the Parsi community about this method of exposing the dead. Reformers claim that,

> Bombay's vulture population is declining and that corpses are therefore sometimes simply left to putrefy. Residents of the new, high-rise apartment blocks nearby also complain that occasional undesirable pieces are dropped on their balconies by the vultures.

This is a fact, and it was reported in the papers — but orthodox Parsis protested their feelings were hurt by its publication in a book. This "closed" mentality operates at all levels among us. Short stories about a particular community will raise a riot. The portrayal of a community's marriage or divorce traditions in a film will send the pious scurrying to law courts to stop it from being screened. A couple of years, back a history textbook for twelve-year-olds introduced in this state brought Muslims and Catholics into the streets in protest.

The Muslims were "hurt" over the use of a word which, when translated into English, implied the Prophet "ran" (chickened out) from Mecca rather than made a more dignified and less hasty "departure." Also, they said a reference to the enmity between Shia and Sunni would not help promote communal harmony and a respect for all religions. The Christians took out processions in the streets protesting that the divinity of Christ had been called into question in the chapter on their religion. The Board bowed to popular pressure and changed the text.

In a multi-religious society such as ours, with every community exhibiting this kind of "siege mentality," we must have laws to protect us from our own follies and from any other likely source of victimization. Under Section 95 of the Criminal Procedural Code and Sections 153 A and 295 A of the Indian Penal Code, any publication can be immediately

banned which vitiates communal harmony by hurting the religious feelings of any one community.

Earlier this year, in May, these laws were put to the test. Two Hindus moved a petition in the Calcutta High Court demanding a ban on the Islamic holy book, the Koran, because it clearly promotes hatred and communal enmity.

As it happens, West Bengal is the only state which has an elected Marxist government, but even our Marxism is unlike anything found elsewhere. The woman justice who heard the petition asked the West Bengal government to file an affidavit explaining its stand on the matter. She later explained that the reason why she didn't throw the case out was because "It is my duty to listen to every petitioner who comes to my court. He may be a madman, but I must give him a chance."

She was widely condemned for her action. The Marxist Chief Minister called the entertainment of the petition a "despicable" act, saying it should never have been admitted. The bar association of the Calcutta High Court passed a resolution expressing its deep concern "at an attempt to make a holy scripture a subject matter for dispute in a court of law and/or to make the same justiciable."

Meanwhile, small fires spread to our Islamic neighbors — Pakistan and Bangladesh — and angry protests were lodged with our embassies there. The whole scenario looked suspiciously like a deep, dark conspiracy to discredit the Muslims and their scriptures and whip up more hatred in impressionable Hindu minds. We were not told just what motivated the petition. It was probably more mischievous in spirit than an intellectual exercise to test the existing laws.

The petitioners made a "request for the forfeiture of the Islamic book, Koran," because it contains words and sayings which promote hatred and ill-will between communities. According to the law, any book which does so is liable to be banned by the government whether it is a classic or an epic, religious or secular, ancient or modern.

The fourteen-page submission quoted chapter and verse as proof. Those of us familiar with the implacable hatred urged upon followers of the Bible will find many parallels:

"Mohammed is Allah's apostle. Those who follow him are ruthless to the unbelievers but merciful to one another." (Surah 48 Ayat 29)

"When the sacred months are over, slay the idolators wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them and lie in ambush everywhere for them." (Surah 9 Ayat 5)

"The true believers are those who have faith in Allah and His apostle and never doubt, and who fight for His cause with their wealth and

persons." (Surah 49 Ayat 15)

Quotations proved that the Koran hurts and insults Christians, saying: "Unbelievers are those who declare Allah is the Messiah [*i.e.*, the Christ, the son of Mary]." (Surah 5 Ayat 17)

"Unbelievers among the People of the Book (Christian, and Jew) and pagans shall burn forever in the fire of Hell. They are the vilest of all creatures." (Surah 98 Ayat 6)

"Garments of fire have been prepared for unbelievers. Scalding water shall be poured upon their heads, melting their skins and that which is in their bellies." (Surah 22 Ayat 19)

Further, the Koran urges Muslims to strike off the heads of non-Muslims and kill them on the battlefield in the name of Allah. They are assured of direct admission into paradise.

In reply to these charges, a well-known Muslim politician-cum-scholar immediately rushed into print to set the record straight. This was after the case was dropped. Said he in a magazine article,

> I find that certain verses from the Koran have been cleverly taken out of their context and shown as if it advocated enmity toward Christians, Jews, pagans, etc. These verses, torn out of context, out of their historical background, can create this impression, particularly, that the Koran preaches violence against the non-Muslims. Hence a proper understanding of their contents and the contexts is necessary: It will remove the cobwebs and clear the air. (Do you hear that, Ayatollah Khomeini?)

Next, the author turned up the same old chestnut — the Koran cannot be translated. It must be read in Arabic to be correctly understood. The attitude of the Koran to those of other religions is one of respect, he said. It recognizes all the other prophets, known and unknown, and declares that there is no land to which god did not send them. "The judgment is of Allah only. He knows the truth and he is the best of deciders."

The idolators who were to be slain, arrested, besieged, and ambushed were pagans of those times who had sworn to kill the Prophet. Islam identifies two categories of people worthy of contempt — *kafirs*, who do not accept the monotheism of Allah, and *mushrikhs*, who associate other gods with Allah. I would think both these cover Hindus, Christians, Jews, and most other religious sects. But instead the writer guns for another group and latches onto Atheists. "Atheism is the eternal foe of Islam and has to be fought unto the last."

Idolators, unbelievers, and pagans mentioned in the Koran are not Hindus in twentieth century India, but Arab pagans of pre-Islamic Arabia. Well, there you have it — Islam loves everybody and it's the Atheists who alone deserve its fire and brimstone.

Readers might be interested to know what the Koran promises them, in addition to all that is assured to them by the Christian religion.

For starters you have

> the curse of Allah and of angels and of all men together. . . . The possessions and the children of those who disbelieve shall not avail them at all against Allah. It is they that are the fuel of Fire. You shall surely be vanquished and gathered unto Hell.

Believers are advised not to take disbelievers, for whom severe punishment is reserved in this world and the next, as close friends. "Make not, therefore, friends with any of them until they emigrate in the way of Allah. If they turn away, then seize them and kill them whenever you find them."

In conclusion: "Those who disbelieve shall have a drink of boiling water."

Islam's bloody history and the zeal with which it has carried the Koran and the sword is matched only by the Christian religion. Hindus in this country, with a memory of Muslim rule, know who is meant by idolators, pagans, and unbelievers. It was this same religious hatred which forced upon us the vivisection of the Indian subcontinent on a basis of religion.

Had the case in question gone ahead, we would have had more bloodbaths. The central government in Delhi, alarmed at the possible fallout, rushed the law minister to West Bengal and had the whole matter quietly dropped. The state government had, however, already prepared its defence as the sole respondents and it made sure that this statement got full publicity.

I am giving some extracts from this written application for two reasons: It emanates from a Marxist government presumably made up of Atheists who are promised hell-fire and boiling water to drink. I find that amusing. And this government, through its spokesman, makes astonishing claims on behalf of a non-existent being without a shred of evidence in support. Says he:

> I state that according to the Islamic belief the Holy Quran [the Koran] is a Divine Book. It contains the words of God Almighty

revealed to His last Prophet Muhammad. The verses of the Holy Quran were revealed on the happenings of particular events and its each and every verse has a connotation of its own on different and separate background.

I further state that as the Holy Quran is a Divine Book no earthly power can sit upon judgment on it and no court of law has jurisdiction to adjudicate it. The Holy Books like the Quran, the Bible, the Geeta [the Gita], the Granth Sahib, etc., or their translations cannot be the subject-matter of adjudication in a court of law. All Holy Scriptures are immune from judicial scrutiny.

I submit that this Honourable Court has no jurisdiction to pronounce a judgment on the Quran, the Holy Scriptures of the Muslims all over the world, each and every word of which, according to Islamic belief, is unalterable.

With our incredible propensity for double-speak and double-think, sometimes I think we Indians go around dressed most gaudily in the emperor's new clothes!

All Is Maya, All Is Illusion
A Short Story
November 1985

Author's Note: In 1982, BBC World Service, London, celebrated its Jubilee. One of the contests announced at the time was for short stories suitable for broadcasting. They received 800 entries from all over the world. This story won the first prize. But I was particularly pleased to see that of the seven selected by the panel, three were by Indian women. The others were from France, Cyprus, Japan, and Israel.

This story is written round the Vedantic philosophical belief that the external world is totally unreal. All outer objects are subjective and all our experiences while awake are not any different from a state of dreaming. Indeed, the whole world is one vast illusion. It does not exist. The only reality is the all-pervading Brahman (god).

This Vedantic philosophy is among the most popular of Hindu schools of thought. In its most extreme form, it is totally life-negating and other-worldly.

Francis King, British author and one of the judges, described this story as "the collapse of a shallow philosophy."

Old Kapur lived on the very edge of E Block at the end of the road. He'd inherited the plot from an uncle who came to Delhi as a refugee from Lahore after the Partition. All the other Punjabi refugees had built handsome houses on their plots. But Kapur chose to live in a tattered tent, though he had water and electricity laid on.

In one corner of his compound there was a small privy with a piece of sacking for a curtain. It was roofless, and when he squatted in there he held up a faded black umbrella against the scorching sun or the

monsoon rain.

He was hollow-eyed, gaunt, and eccentric. He had a beaked nose and high-domed head, and he talked to himself all the time. The children of E Block were terrified of him. He haunted their dreams. "Behave, or Kapur Kaka will get you," their mothers threatened.

Sometimes when they passed his tent on their way to school they saw him putting up his washing on the line. He seemed stretched to an incredible height. Sometimes they spotted the top of his umbrella inside the privy and then they stopped to pelt it with stones.

"Who's that?" he roared, shaking the thing up and down in a helpless rage where he squatted. But when he came out, they'd vanished.

Kapur was a loner and lived very frugally, cooking simple meals on a primus stove set on a rough table outside his tent. He advertised himself as a practising homeopath with a board on his fence which read "Dr. A. Kapur, M.B.B.S. (Homo)." Since his neighbours thought him a fraud, most of his patients came from other suburbs of Delhi.

When the weather was very wet, his tent leaked. Then he crawled into his car for shelter. It was a vintage Hupmobile and it stood with its axles resting on neat piles of bricks. Nothing remained of the original thing except its body, and that Kapur kept polished and gleaming with wax. The gossiping women, who sat on their terraces on string cots and gazed down onto his premises, reckoned that old Kapur was worth many hundred thousand in gold, jewelery, and cash which his family had brought away from Lahore when they fled the city. One of the local legends was that when the Hupmobile arrived in Delhi, even its fittings were of solid gold plated with chrome. Where was all that fabulous wealth now?

The only neighbour who ever cared to stop and chat with Kapur was Roopchand Aurora, who lived in a room on the roof of a house he owned. It stood on a triangular plot at the other end of the street and was rented out.

Aurora dressed in a dhoti and shirt and went barefoot, much to the embarrassment of his three sons who were "English speaking," wore suits and ties, and were married to "convent-educated" girls.

Every morning, Aurora took his jug of water and marched down the street past Kapur's tent on his way to the open space beyond where shrubs and bushes afforded some privacy. He'd never gotten used to using the tiny lavatory in his flat. It was asking too much of a simple peasant like himself to perform this obnoxious function right inside the house and within earshot of all his household gods lined up on a high shelf in his kitchen.

And every morning on his way back, with his sacred thread looped over one ear, Aurora stopped at Kapur's fence to speculate on the general futility of life. He did so in a cheerful tone and at the top of his voice.

But this particular morning Aurora had come looking for sympathy. His tenant had given notice that he intended to leave. This was the second family in six months which was moving out in a hurry. He looked as though he'd burst into tears.

"I cannot explain it! Why does he want to leave? He says he must go because things are happening to his family and the house is the cause. His three-year-old daughter almost drowned in the bathtub. His wife slipped on the staircase. His son keeps running mysterious fevers. An astrologer has told him it all comes from living in a three-cornered house with three-cornered rooms. So he is moving into the house next door. He says he'll be happier there, with four walls to each room. Even the tenant before him said a triangular house is inauspicious and it made them all quarrel. If my house gets a bad name no one will give me the rent I ask for it. Then how will I live? My sons do nothing for me. Don't I myself live in a three-cornered room upstairs? Do you believe in such superstitions, Daktar-saab?"

Kapur narrowed his eyes and considered. "Brother, it is all illusion," he said ponderously. "There is no reality in these superstitions. All this real world, all sorrow, fear, anxiety, and suffering, do not exist. It is all illusion."

"Ah! But my tenant does not think so. He feels and he fears, and it is pointless my telling him that it is all illusion."

"But what is emotion, feeling, and sensation? Illusion! A figment of the mind. When our parents died we wept. Where is that sorrow today? We thought our grief was real and true, but where did it go, brother?"

"Where?"

"Only the memory remains with us and when we die it will be mixed with our ashes and vanish forever. But wherefore then does God make such grief, such fear, such anxiety in us? Why should we suffer something so acute, so real, if it must ultimately vanish?"

Aurora blinked his faded eyes and frowned in concentration. He tried to follow the argument as he sucked on his toothless gums. The gossiping women looked down the street and wondered aloud to each other over their fences as to what it was that so absorbed the two buzzards.

"Let us suppose, friend," Kapur said hoarsely, warming to his subject, "let us suppose that you are alone and walking late one

evening. And in the dimness you see a snake lying in your path . . ."

"Ah! I have seen them often, when I go to answer the call of nature! So! I see a snake lying in my path! Proceed!"

"You see this snake and you step back in alarm. You are startled when you see it lying in your path. You suffer intense fear, and your fear is very real, is it not?"

"Yes, yes! I suffer fear, intense fear, and my feelings are very real, Daktar-saab!"

"But the reptile does not move. It lies so still, so still! You now feel bold enough to stoop down and examine it closer . . ."

"I stoop down and examine it closer!" Aurora echoed.

"And when you do, what do you find?"

"What do I find?"

"You find it to be only a rope! A rope, ha! ha! You have been fooled in the darkness! It is not a snake at all, but a rope!" Kapur crowed.

"Only a rope," Aurora echoed uncertainly, wondering how all this profound argument could help him persuade his tenant to stay on.

"Now, Aurora-saab! While you believed it to be a snake, you felt fear, did you not? Real fear and real surprise?"

"Yes, yes! Real fear and real surprise."

Kapur looked triumphant, as if he'd made Aurora tumble into a well-laid trap. Shaking a bony finger at him, he cried, "And so it is with life, too! So it is with life! The serpent — it is the illusion — like life. But the rope is the reality, like Brahma. The ultimate reality is God. All else is *maya*, is illusion!"

"Is *maya*! Is illusion!" echoed Aurora "Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

This Kapur, he was thinking, is either a very pious fellow or a fraud. And all that money and gold people say he has hidden away, does he see that as *maya* and illusion too?

Both men stood silent for a moment, their eyes on the ground, pondering the remarkable enigma of the serpent and the rope. Then Aurora turned to go.

"You are taking my pills?" Kapur called after him. Roopchand Aurora stopped and dived into his shirt pocket to produce a small phial of tiny white pellets.

"Ah yes! I am taking them, Daktar-saab!"

A friend had told him that the best cure for his piles would be a live bedbug in a lump of jaggrey. But he had preferred to trust Kapur's pills.

"And remember, no sour things while you are on my medicine."

"No! No sour things!" echoed Aurora as he trotted off.

That night the city had one of those dust storms now so common in

summer. The air turned turbid and blotted out the stars. The sky hung low in heavy dust clouds showing yellow ochre in the lightning flashes.

When the rain descended, the drops were heavy and swollen. They exploded where they fell. People sleeping on terraces and in their yards hurried indoors, dragging their string cots and lugging their bedding. As the heavens thundered and roared, a sudden power failure plunged the city into darkness. Everybody was sure it was during that black suffocating hour that Kapur was attacked.

The sweeper-woman carried the news down the street as she did her morning rounds. The old Hup was toppled on its side, she reported. Curious children ran to see and found its seats eviscerated while broken springs and fragments of leather upholstery lay scattered about. The tent had been viciously slashed into ribbons, and boxes of books and medicines ransacked.

Old Kapur was found in his privy where he'd scuttled for refuge in the dark. He was crouched there with a gash across his head, his hair gory, and his shirt stiff with blood. Someone fetched a doctor who bandaged his wound, gave him a shot, and advised him to take a few days rest in bed. He was clearly in a state of shock and was not very lucid when questioned.

The gossiping women said he'd refused to tell the police whether he'd lost anything of value. He moaned only about his books and his medicines. "All ruined, all ruined by the rain!"

Only Roopchand Aurora cared to visit him where he lay on his rusty iron bed and lumpy mattress, propped up with pillows.

"Your car is quite beyond repair, Daktar-saab!" he cried cheerfully.

"It was my family car," Kapur wheezed weakly. "It had seen our good days. It carried my family to safety during the riots in Lahore. We owed our lives to it."

"Do not take it so hard, Daktar-saab. It was not much use to you anyway, was it? Besides, these feelings of grief and loss you have are bound to pass in time. They cannot be real if they do not last. They are nothing but illusion!"

"Nothing but illusion?" Kapur queried weakly.

"All *maya*, all illusion!" Aurora cried, thinking of the 100,000 rupees the old miser was said to have lost. "We think we have a thing — in fact, we are sure we own it. It is ours, ours! And then come thieves in the night and take it from us. Then it is theirs, theirs! But we will die, and they will die, and then whose will it be?"

"Whose? Whose?"

"Nobody's! See? It was all *maya*, all illusion!"

"All *maya*, all illusion," Kapur moaned, thinking of the bundles of notes almost as crisp as the day they were printed bearing the head of George VI, and the gold sovereigns, and the Victorian rupees of solid silver, and the jewellery — the entire ancestral wealth of the Kapurs hidden in the car door panels, under the floor, in the seats. He began to weep.

"Do not take it so hard, Daktar-saab! Nothing is real, I tell you. All this world and everything in it is without reality. We only think it is real. What is money, I ask you, huh? Dirt off one's hands. Even scavenging birds do not eat it."

Kapur's chest heaved and his shoulders shook convulsively.

"There is no reality in worldly wealth," Aurora crowed. "Think of it all as *maya*."

"All gone! All gone!" Kapur howled. "All *maya*, all illusion!"

If Wishes Were Horses

December 1985

In May of this year we saw the revival of a spectacular sacrifice — the Great Horse Sacrifice — the most popular of major sacrifices among the early Aryans, thousands of years ago. This sacrifice was last performed around 1734 by Maharajah Jaya Singh, founder of Jaipur.

Horse Thief

The *Ashvamedha* or, horse-sacrifice, was a demonstration of muscle-flexing indulged in by ancient kings. A special horse was allowed to wander at will outside a king's territory, followed by a band of soldiery. The king then laid claim to new lands and forced their rulers to pay tribute. War was declared on any chief who tried to turn back the sacred animal.

This was theoretically permitted only to kings who were very powerful and could support such a claim," according to one historian. "The sacrifices were conducted on a vast scale, involving many hundreds of priests and large herds of animals, not to mention the various objects used in the ceremony. For the population, they were vast spectacles to be talked of for generations. No doubt they kept the more critical minds diverted and depicted the king as an exceptional person in communicating with the gods, even if only through the priests. The priests too were not ordinary mortals, since they were in effect the transmitters of divinity. Thus the throne and the priesthood worked hand in hand.

That Was Then

While the horse and soldiers ranged the countryside, at home the king, his queen, and court performed daily sacrifices for a year. Legends of the greatness and glory of the royal line were told. On the return of the horse, the queen anointed it. Dr. Surendra Ajnat in his *Critique on Vedas*, quoting from the Yajur Veda, describes how the wife of the householder addressed the sacred animal: "Oh horse, come to me. I will draw your semen inside. I want to be pregnant with your semen." She then lay with the creature. Afterwards, it was killed and the flesh roasted. A special treatise on the Rig Veda gives meticulous details on exactly how the flesh was to be shared out among the priests. Sacred texts detailed the blessings assured when the distribution was correctly done. Anyone adopting a different system of carving it up was doomed to go to hell.

> To those who divide the sacrificial animal in the way mentioned above, it becomes a guide to heaven. But those who make the division otherwise are like scoundrels and miscreants.

This Is Now

Undoubtedly, a lot of colour has gone out of our lives since those ancient days. Our rajas and ranis have been reduced to tourist attractions. Our modern rulers mark out their territories differently. And we have lost the taste for horse meat — even of the sanctified sort. The Horse Sacrifice is mentioned in all school texts, but sanitized of its sexual details. We still, however, have our priests.

The Horse Sacrifice held in Hyderabad was of necessity a pale reflection of those grander times. Shorn of all its more bizarre details, it could hardly be termed a true sacrifice according to the book. But in cost it left no room for criticism. Lasting for a week from May 27, it cost more than 2.5 million rupees. Food, accommodation, and travel expenses were provided for devotees coming in from other places, and into the sacrificial fire went 10,000 kilograms of clarified butter, 7,000 kilograms of gingelly oil, 250 kilograms of rice, 100 bags of sugar, and much else. Members of the Indian Rationalist Association tried, without success, to stop this criminal waste and prevent the sacrifice. But the Chief Minister of the State, a former actor who still casts himself in the role of a demi-god, supported the organizer, the Jagathguru Swami Ramanujachary of Kashi Pith, equal in status to a Hindu pope. He is one of the staunchest advocates of fundamental Hinduism, which he would like to see restored to its pristine form.

More than 15,000 people attended the rites every day, some coming in from foreign countries. In an interview published by a weekly newspaper from Bombay, the Jagathguru stoutly defended the *Yagna* (sacrifice). For one thing, his purpose was purely spiritual. Said he:

> Nothing is right in the world today. Everything is deteriorating. So you see a few conscientious individuals trying to stem this rot in their own different way. Through science and all that. *Asvamedha Yagna* is my way.

He rejected the historical view that the horse sacrifice was performed only to further imperialistic ambition. Brahmins performed it too for absolving themselves of sin. Its scope is unlimited. "It's a very powerful *yagna*, rather the most powerful one," he declared.

> One can achieve almost any objective through it. We have done it to clean our political scene, and promote peace and prosperity in the world. Besides, people who perform or even just attend the *yagna* get cleansed of all their sins and attain salvation.

And, It Is Still Insanity

He, however, conceded that one shouldn't expect improvements overnight. "But you can rest assured no force on earth can deny *Asvamedha Yagna* its due."

The Jagathguru draws his wisdom from the oldest books in the world — the Vedas.

> I tell you there is nothing in the universe which is not mentioned in the Vedas. Vedas were not written by man. When man was created, Vedas were put into his hands to guide him through life. They embody the truth, the eternal truth. All man has to do is follow them implicitly. I won't arrogate to myself the capability of analyzing them. God's ways are inscrutable.

The disappearance of this powerful rite he attributed to the Atheism which dominated Hindu society after the advent of Buddha. "Thanks to state patronage it received from Ashoka and other upstarts like him, Buddhism spread far and wide and threatened to swallow up our age-old religion."

The Rationalists denounced the whole circus as blind superstition.

But what they called blind faith, the Jagathguru saw as faith in the Vedas (Ved-Viswas). When a journalist remarked "Intellect, a god-given faculty, apparently has little role to play in your scheme of things," the pontiff replied with some asperity: "I think you must stop asking me questions in this vein," he said.

> I've had enough of it. If putting one's faith in the Vedas is a sign of being dumb, call me so by all means. This is a typical Indian attitude which is keeping us poor and backward, while foreigners derive their concepts from the Vedas and forge ahead.

I would like to believe that our backwardness comes from not sending enough foodstuffs up in smoke accompanied by the chanting of magical cantrips. Ironically, one of the commonest criticisms of enlightened Indians among us is that they have forgotten their ancient cultural heritage, whereas foreigners are reaping rich rewards from believing in Hinduism.

Flexing Muscle

There were two interesting worldly considerations which intruded on the whole sublime scene. Hyderabad has a large Muslim population and a long Islamic tradition in its culture. Its choice as a venue for a show of strength by more rabid Hindu devotees was obviously intended. And, of course, the caste factor intruded once again. *Harijans* (Untouchables) were not allowed into the holy of holies, close to the sacred fire, with the Brahmin priests. Only Brahmins well-versed in reciting the Vedas were chosen. "Everything demands certain qualifications," said the Jagathguru. "You wouldn't let any quack perform surgery on you. You will insist on a qualified surgeon."

But then what about Untouchables who attain a mastery of reciting the Vedas? They still remain outside the pale, he declared. Being able to recite the Vedas doesn't transform an Untouchable into a Brahmin. But if he continues "to do good karma in this birth, yes, he can get promoted in the next birth and perform any *yagna* he wishes to then."

The horse paraded through the streets didn't end up as steak. Since the *Yagna* was for the promotion of peace, the creature was a messenger of peace. You simply don't eat messengers of peace. Instead, a dummy made of dough was sacrificed — according to the proper carving technique, no doubt, recommended as absolutely unchangeable and immutable in ancient texts.

Alas, for Our Side

And what of the benighted Rationalists who were foolish enough to set themselves up against the infallibility of the Vedas? The pious Chief Minister, who supported the show staged by the Jagathguru and his magicians, provided them with proper "police protection" throughout the *Yagna*.

> That proved useful from the very first day when those so-called Rationalists tried to disturb the *Yagna*," said the Hindu pontiff. "The police rounded them up and kept them in custody till the last day of the *Yagna*.

The most disturbing aspect of the revivalism now evident in Indian religions is its implacable nature. Rites and rituals are now becoming elaborate power games for which venues are selected for confrontation and challenge. Maybe the day is not far off when reason and sanity — if allowed to speak at all — will do so only from behind cage bars.

Ajnat, Dr. Surendra. *Critique on Vedas*. Jullundur, India: Amarjyotii Press, 1979. Published on behalf of the Atheist Society of India, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Stirring A Hornet's Nest?

January 1986

On November 17, 1985, thousands of Muslim men from nine districts of eastern Maharastra and the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh marched through the streets of Nagpur in a massive demonstration of solidarity in the faith.

Three days later, Bombay saw an estimated 100,000 more Muslims out in procession. Furious and abusive speeches were made and a petition presented to the Chief Minister in defence of their religion. Not since 1971, when the community came out to denounce the bombings at the holy shrine in Mecca, had Bombay seen so many Muslims march together.

Across the country, in Patna, another procession of young Muslims grew violent and was dispersed by baton-wielding police.

Meanwhile, in the interior of Maharastra, a smaller group of intrepid Muslim women, about eighty-three in all, had set out on a more hazardous march of their own through the district towns. Wherever they stopped to address gatherings of their own community, they were heckled, abused, and stoned by fanatics incited by mullahs and bigots. The police finally advised them to abandon their campaign because they could no longer ensure the women's safety.

Women's Rights? Outrageous!

This very unequal battle of the sexes within the Muslim community turned on a historic judgement handed down by the Supreme Court in April of 1985. Quite simply, it declared that a divorced Muslim woman

has a right to alimony from her husband. According to Islamic tradition, only men have the right to divorce their wives — a practice which literally means dumping one to take another. The idea that she should be compensated in some way has worked the faithful into a fine froth throughout the country.

The Supreme Court judgment encouraged the radical members of the Poona-based Muslim *Satyashodhak Mandal* to set out on a march to educate those who have been victimized by an unjust religious tradition. This group was founded by the late Hamid Dalwai, a rationalist reformer.

They went under the banner of *Talaq Mukti Morcha* (Freedom from Divorce.) And they demanded the abolition of oral divorce by which a man can rid himself of a wife by merely saying "*Talaq! Talaq! Talaq!*" (I divorce thee!) three times. They also wanted polygamy declared illegal. (Muslim personal law allows four wives.) And they also demanded maintenance for any wife put out of her marriage.

The most important demand of the *Mandal* is one it has espoused for many years — the introduction of a uniform civil code to cover all communities equally, just as we have a uniform criminal code. Ironically, our constitution guarantees all citizens equality before the law. But this right is quite cancelled out by the presence of religious personal laws in each community. So 50 percent of all Indians are actually disadvantaged, and that 50 percent happens to be female.

The massive marches by indignant males, on the other hand, were to voice their opposition to anyone trying to change the immutable laws of Allah — the *Shariat*. They stood by their right to treat their women as they deserved, and nobody had any business trying to prevent it.

One disturbing aspect of these huge processions is the obvious resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism among us — a cancer already eating into the vitals of Middle East countries. It bodes no good for Indian Muslims, the largest minority community here (but already far behind the rest). It also bodes ill for Hindu-Muslim relations, with a corresponding rise of obscurantism in that majority community also evident.

Shah Bano Begum's Fight

The current turmoil within the Muslim community has been steadily snowballing since April after the Supreme Court handed down its judgment in the "Shah Bano Case." The plaintiff was a sixty-five-year-old woman, Shah Bano Begum, who won a long and arduous legal battle

for alimony from her former husband, a lawyer. The court decided in her favour under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedures Code. The judgment made the illiterate old woman an instant heroine, applauded by all those interested in seeing civil law secularized.

The judgment was immediately denounced by mullahs, *maulvis*, and politicians within the community. They said it was a grave interference with their religion. According to the *Shariat*, a divorced woman is treated with compassion. She is allowed to stay on in her husband's home for three months and thirteen days, during which she can attempt to work out a reconciliation. If the differences are not resolved within that period, she must leave and fend for herself; her husband is no longer responsible for her.

Because of the *purdah* system, the level of education among Muslim women is very low. They are ill-equipped to go out and work, even as labourers. The presence of polygamy renders them particularly insecure. Significantly, most maintenance cases in the courts are on behalf of Muslim women. Divorce carries a stringent social stigma for a woman. In more orthodox homes, no one will drink water or take food served by her. In large cities, many are forced into prostitution to earn a livelihood.

Shah Bano Begum, unlettered and uneducated, was congratulated for her courageous stand and felicitated at public functions. Radical groups held meetings at which divorced Muslim women stood up and described their pitiful plight.

The Muslim *Satyashodhak Mandal* had a conference in Bombay in August. The orthodox shrieked their protests outside the hall. Several men and women got into the audience and tried to prevent people from speaking. They rushed the platform and tried to snatch the microphone from the organizer, Mrs. Mehrunissa Dalwai. They demanded that she first learn something about Koranic law.

The conference passed, however, two resolutions. It demanded the enactment of Article 44 for a uniform civil code. Applauding the Supreme Court judgment, it declared that "a common civil code would help the cause of national integration by removing disparate loyalties to laws which have conflicting ideologies."

The conference also condemned the "sinister campaign" launched by the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board against the judgment and commended Mrs. Shah Bano Begum for her historic fight in defense of "social justice and equality and against unjust and inhuman laws which are claimed to have been based on the *Shariat*."

God's "Immutable" Laws

In actual practice, more than three-fourths of the *Shariat* is not observed here. If the pious really want all of Allah's immutable and divine laws left untouched, then they must march in procession for the right to be publicly flogged for drinking, stoned for adultery, and have their hands chopped off for theft, along with other divinely-sanctioned sadism. They must atone for all their vast smuggling operations between India and the Gulf and stop putting their money into banks here and abroad to earn interest. They must also insist that all those Muslims who have emigrated to America, Canada, England, and other Christian countries stand by their religious right to follow *Shariat* law.

Of course, the situation is the old familiar one of the devil quoting scripture. The *Shariat* is not immutable, only certain portions are — particularly those that might reinforce male chauvinism. The *Shariat* wasn't even part of Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet, nor even in the first hundred years. Only after that did Allah get busy, and it evolved over the next three centuries, being changed and changed again to suit *caliph* and *qazi*. Today there are as many as ten different schools of interpretation.

We have no way of knowing how Allah feels about the way his laws get twisted. Polygamy, which he permits to Indian Muslims, has been made a criminal offence for Tunisian Muslims. Adoption is allowed in Turkey, but Indian Muslims have blocked all efforts to have a rational law of adoption here; because of that, only Hindus can adopt children legally while minorities are merely allowed guardianship. Bangladesh has a vigorous family planning campaign, but Muslims here are encouraged by mullahs to have large families to swell the community's vote bank against the Hindus.

Politicians, some of them ministers, have openly denounced the Supreme Court judgment. They want Muslims to be excluded from the purview of Article 44 for a uniform civil code. "If the *Shariat* is touched," one Muslim leader said, "the country will break."

Such bombast will surely invite a Hindu backlash. The country was already broken once in 1947 to accommodate a Muslim "nation." How many Pakistans must we now create for every new demand by bigots? We already have the Sikh clamour for Khalistan and its own personal law. Ironically, such divisive politics has put secularists and those of the extreme Hindu right all on the same side: We all want a secular civil code to counter the forces of disintegration.

Just how active the fundamentalists have been during 1985 was proved by Shah Bano Begum herself coming out in a press conference in mid-November to repent her folly. She declared that many learned men had called on her and explained the great harm her case had done to Islam. She wanted the decree revoked!

There was a public outcry against the obvious victimization of the superstitious old woman. Undoubtedly, the learned men put the fear of Allah in her. At her age, she didn't have long before she found herself before the seat of justice asking mercy for her poor, misguided soul.

Her request that the judgement be struck down was rejected by the Supreme Court. To avoid further questions and harassment, she declared herself chronically ill and went into seclusion. But her case now holds out hope for hundreds of women from her community who are otherwise denied justice from their religion.

Islamic Fundamentalism's Power

It is regrettable that Indian Muslims are allowing themselves to fall under the thrall of fundamentalist leaders. They are already backward because of their self-imposed isolation from the national mainstream. In larger cities, they live in ghettoes, and their dropout rate in schools is ten times higher than any other community. Their children are first sent to mosque schools or *maddrassas* where they learn to read the scriptures. By the time they come out at eight or nine years of age, they are already behind others. Muslim women are entirely dominated by the males within their families and live very secluded lives in *purdah*.

At a conference called "Save the *Shariat*" held near Poona, pious men stood up and cried that if they were called to choose between the Koran, acts of Parliament, and judgments of the Supreme Court, they would obey the Koran.

Such declarations further rouse Hindu suspicions because of the trans-territorial brotherhood enjoined by Islam. In times of war with Pakistan, Indian Muslims are seen as fifth columnists. Even in cricket matches between the two countries, they rejoice over Pakistan's victories.

The influx of petrodollars has brought them some affluence. Ads for Gulf jobs sometimes specify "Only Muslims need apply" or "Muslims Preferred." Elaborate mosques and centres of Islamic learning have been funded by Arab money.

The resurgence of fundamentalism is disquieting because we have a steady flow of illegal Muslim immigrants from both Islamic states —

Pakistan and Bangladesh. The crisis in Assam hinges on the influx of thousands of Muslims, swamping out the local Assamese who are chiefly Hindu. Many make their way to cities and are absorbed into the ghettoes.

The Iranian revolution and the international attention it attracted gave the lower middle class a certain pride in their faith. The rabid enmity between Shia and Sunni played out in the Middle East is reflected here. Urdu papers and other regional papers produced for Muslims give extensive coverage to West Asian affairs.

The present government is playing it safe by declaring that it has no intention of interfering with any community's personal law by acting upon Article 44 for the establishment of a common civil code. It is not interested in stirring a hornet's nest at this point in time.

Fortunately, some of our Supreme Court judges are among the most enlightened we have. And their secular outlook holds out hope for women of any community who appeal against their own religious laws. The Supreme Court judge who handed down the decree in the case of Shah Bano Begum declared, "The kind of social and political response the judgment has evoked just proves how much the decision was needed." He saw the verdict as a significant landmark in "the march of law towards social reform."

God Returns Bringing Happiness!

February 1986

I am writing this from Poona where Godman Rajneesh established his original Eden and lived for seven years. It was from here that he was whisked off by his foreign disciples to America, that capitalist paradise he's always admired. Air-lifted with him were his many Rolls Royce cars, his jewels and royal regalia, along with his throne.

His arrest and subsequent deportation has been given considerable coverage here. Even his critics have expressed outrage at the way the man was shackled and led off like a common criminal. Pritish Nandy, editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, devoted two pages to what he called "The Witch-Hunt." He declared that the brutality with which Rajneesh was treated was part of a rabid Christian fundamentalist back-lash mixed with racism, evidence of which he saw on his recent visit to America when he called at the Oregon commune.

Rajneesh's arrest and imprisonment, said Nandy, was a shameless attempt to humiliate the man who dared to question the might of the state. I know how the local officials and the media feel about him. I have seen the paranoia of his neighbors, the bullet holes on the street signs that lead to Rajneeshpuram, and it is absolutely clear that every attempt is being made by the state and its machinery to play to the gallery: to publicly humiliate him in such a way that he can never put his show back on the road.

How can you treat a man, whose following runs into millions all over the world, in such fashion? How dare any government openly ridicule a public figure in such a way under the pretense of its

immigration laws? Is this the democracy that America boasts of?

This is clearly arrogance. And fascist, racial arrogance, in my opinion. It happened in the case of Reverend Moon, the Korean. Now it's Rajneesh, the Indian.

Nandy accused the "conservative, middle class, muscle-flexing Rambo" of being up in arms against aliens offering the brightest young people of the land "alternative Utopias."

"If millions of people, for whatever reason, have chosen to follow the man," shrilled Nandy,

> the state must learn to respect their feelings. It cannot ride roughshod over the faith of people. For this faith represents a search. A search away from the values of the world we were born into. We may not respect Rajneesh, but we must learn to respect that search.

Ironically, Rajneesh left India because of the growing hostility of the people here in a city associated for centuries with Brahmin orthodoxy. Morarji Desai, when prime minister, refused him permission to move his commune anywhere else in India.

Nandy's indignation about America's refusal to respect people's search for whatever the Indian godman is peddling reads somewhat strangely because he starts his piece off on a negative note. He is no admirer of Rajneesh and refused to be shocked by the answers the fellow gave during an interview with him.

> He certainly did not outrage me. What he did, however, was worry me. Worry me, not for what he said or did, but for what he was capable of doing or saying, considering the absolutely incredible power he held over those people of his commune. They would die for him at the drop of a hat.

"Memories of Jonestown haunted me," Nandy wrote. And well they might!

On the night of Rajneesh's arrest in America, the inmates of his Poona ashram in Koregaon Park kept the neighbours from getting any sleep. They sent their guru supportive "messages" by dancing all night to a rock band, combining Latin rhythms with eastern religious chants. One hopes the man felt a sympathetic tingle in his spine as he languished on a steel bench in his cell, denied his special throne to sit on

while in jail. The chief of the cult said the Bhagwan's arrest was inevitable because "politicians and Christians would never tolerate the influence of such a great soul of humanity."

And now America has lost the chance of a lifetime: Rajneesh declares he will never return there — never.

For some days after his deportation there was much speculation about where the god would choose to ascend when his special aircraft finally touched down. Here his rooms had been made ready and arrangements were afoot to fly his throne to Delhi. A crowd of devotees and the press waited and watched for two nights at Delhi airport. Many carried bunches of flowers, and the road in front of the terminal was carpeted with rose petals.

When he finally emerged from the gate, at around 2:00 A.M., they had hysterics. Placards welcomed him with the words "The God Returns Bringing Happiness."

Under the circumstances, there wasn't much else he could bring. With him were only eight members of his household staff. Readers might recall my earlier article on this rich man's guru and his reasons for fleeing India and the income tax authorities in order to establish his kingdom in golden America. His admiration of the United States as the only free country in the world where nobody despises money and the good things of life has now undergone a radical change.

Judging from his first press conference, he has switched sides — for the time being, anyway. Russia is the nicer country, said he; at least it is straightforward.

Having banned the robe of orange, the colour of fire and strong vibrations, he himself wore a blue-grey gown designed and sewn by his devotees. And though his cap was studded with glittering diamonds, he dismissed them as "proletariat stones."

"I have known about hell but now I have seen it in the United States," he said, describing his twelve days of torture, hopping from prison to prison in North Carolina and Oregon, chained like "a dangerous criminal." He denounced the American legal system and his trial without crime or guilt. He said he had been fined "for having done nothing." At this point he admitted he had lied — but for the very first time in his life — a nicety the Americans were unprepared to take into consideration. He owned up, he said, because his disciples advised him he might otherwise be killed.

Quite forgetting that he and his mob had left India in disgust three years before because of the hostility of Poona residents and the frequent assaults on his foreign followers, he now expressed delight to

be back in his motherland — where true freedom flourishes — "the land of Buddha and Mahavira."

He described his harassment by United States law enforcement officers as a "fascist strategy" and said prison guards had refused to provide him with a special diet for his diabetes and had confined him in cells reeking with cigarette smoke and stale perfume which aggravated his asthma. This was indeed a comedown for a god whose disciples made visitors undergo a "sniff test" before they approached him too closely. And instead of his throne, designed for a king with a bad back, he had languished on a steel bench all night with cockroaches crawling around him.

The United States and not Russia is the most dangerous nation, said the godman. It could mean the end of mankind. He called upon the whole world to unite and put the "United States monster in its place." It must be "hushed-up" forever, he told the press. The United States is not a democracy, but a hypo*cracy*. Americans are not human, but sub-human. They spend almost 75 percent of all money on weapons. Convinced that he has come off the winner in the case United States vs. Bhagwan Rajneesh, he said this proved that "a simple innocent man" has more power than the greatest nuclear nation on earth.

But what exactly was the godman's crime — that is, apart from the first-time lie and thirty-five other violations of immigration laws? His crime, he said, was simply that he'd built "a dreamworld where 5,000 men and women lived a rich, healthy, joyous and prosperous life." This remarkable success had given "dirty politicians" an inferiority complex and they wanted to destroy his marvelous dream world. The best way of achieving this was to remove Rajneesh from the scene.

This high priest of self-indulgence, ecstacy, and hedonism, who unashamedly declared his love of money and a good life, now sees India as the land of people poor in material things but rich in spirituality, "the only land in the world which can still realize the evolution of higher consciousness, the ultimate goal of Buddha and enlightenment of mankind." The prodigal has indeed returned, even while endorsing all that he used to denounce as negativist gobbledygook. Instead, he now finds our very earth and air friendly and loving and denounces the materialism of the West which believes only in "eat, drink and be merry." In the finest tradition of Indian sage-dom, Rajneesh has retreated to the high Himalayas in Himachal Pradesh to a well-guarded, fenced-in estate. Devotees may visit him there for advice.

Having cancelled out his religion, his devotees need no longer wear the orange robe with the mandatory necklace with his phiz dangling on

it. He has also ordered the burning of his book on Rajneeshism, authored largely by his former secretary, Ma Anand Sheela, the bad girl of the whole silly scenario — whom he has accused of decamping with his millions to set herself up in Germany with members of her dirty tricks department, some of whom were messing around with rat poison and other toxic kinds of counter-magic to destroy the wholesome happiness of the Oregon commune.

The local ashram looks forward to his return to Poona. "Bhagwan lived here for seven years before he left for the United States and his vibrations are still here. We feel them strongly," says the ashram head.

But the neighbours in Koregaon Park feel differently. "I am very glad that his religion has been disbanded and that the Rajneesh cult is disintegrating," said one, an air chief marshall. "It was a blessing when they left Poona. The Rajneesh followers were a menace and nuisance to society and especially Koregaon Park."

Another declared that the man and his followers "had no morals or ethics and Indians had started aping their behaviour."

Only the local tradesmen might welcome them back. "If the United States no longer wants Rajneesh, I would like him to come back to Poona," said one store-keeper on Main Street, "because all his followers will come too and business will be good again."

But is there any lesson to be learnt from this sorry tale of bad faith, avarice, and chicanery? Most certainly, yes! The Bhagwan has demonstrated to the world the corrupting influence of organized religion. For over three years, say his disciples, he let Ma Sheela go on an ego-trip while he observed a vow of silence and watched — and waited. He knew — he just knew she was going to fall flat on her face. And when she finally did — lo! the Bhagwan had made his point.

"Bhagwan wanted to shatter this concept of religion," said one inmate of the Poona ashram.

> So he castrated his own religion. He wanted to tell the world that organised religion is not the key so he destroyed it himself. And to enlighten people so that they can live in a commune of love and harmony, he made this play, this *lila*, this drama!

In reality, nothing much has changed apart from the garb and some shuffling around of the top personnel. It's business as usual for Godman Rajneesh, with millions in other currencies tied up in communes and cult centers around the world and five-hundred thousand zombies still there. Despite the bad time the United States gave him, Rajneesh still has his cake and will eat it too. You can't keep a godman down.

The Illustrated Weekly of India. Edited by Pritish Nandy. Bombay, India.

Raising The Dead

March 1986

By the time this appears in print one of the more momentous events of 1986 will be behind us — the visit to India of Pope John Paul II. Nobody who understands the nexus between politics and religion is fooled by the heavy ritual and ceremony which surrounds the pontiff's arrivals and departures in countries around the world. Not unnaturally, orthodox Hindu leaders here have been expressing misgivings about what impact his visit might have on the Roman Catholic Church's evangelizing activities. Some have suggested they should show their disapproval by demonstrating against him wherever he makes a stopover. Of all the Christian sects, possibly the most aggressive stance is that adopted by the Roman Catholics. Most communal riots with Christians have usually involved Roman Catholics in conflict with Hindus.

On this occasion, however, the Pope will do India a signal honor by presiding over the beatification of a nun for the first time on our native soil. It is easy to see how the highly esoteric procedure takes a strong hold on the imagination of the faithful. The beatification in this case is to take place in the southern state of Kerala.

The good woman who is to be raised a couple of notches above the ordinary dead is one whose life story would fit any other Roman Catholic saint. She died on July 28, 1946, and lies in a grand tomb in a remote village. Having died, she might have gone the way of all flesh, but for the astonishing perceptiveness of the local children who asked very trivial favours at first — good marks in school and saving from the teacher's rod. Sister Alphonsa rose to the occasion so successfully that she soon drew scores of adults who presented even tougher problems

for her to solve. Undeterred, she disappointed nobody and miracles began to occur — tummy upsets were cured, barren women conceived, and physical deformities were straightened out. July 28, the date of her death, became a sacred day on which hordes of pilgrims descended on the village to pray for her favours. All this evidence and much more was thoroughly investigated by the Vatican before deciding that Sister Alphonsa deserved exceptional recognition.

The investigation of Alphonsa's credentials started at the level of the diocese over thirty years ago. The tribunal held 847 sessions and examined 126 witnesses to her miracles. A ten-thousand-page report was submitted to the Vatican in 1962. The apostolic tribunal, in its turn, examined forty-six witnesses and within a year declared she deserved beatification. It was a long wait for Alphonsa, but I suppose one cannot afford to take any risks in such matters. She must now wait for a chance to pull off a really stunning miracle before she can make it to sainthood. If it's any comfort to her, however, she will be declared worthy of veneration by the Pope himself when he visits her tomb. Undoubtedly, this will seem old hat in a country which creates new gods and goddesses with equal facility.

To share the honours with Alphonsa is another Kerala miracle-worker, a Carmelite priest, Father Elias. He has had a much longer wait than she, having died as far back as 1871. But he hasn't been wasting his time either and has a number of miracles of his own chalked up.

I've not been able to discover anything about Elias, but even if I'd not read about my good sister Alphonsa I'd have easily guessed she enjoyed appallingly poor health during her life. Somehow there is a perverse kind of streak in us women. Only extreme suffering can shape us to sainthood and we never do well unless we're victimized. This morbid propensity has produced the best women saints in most religions.

Alphonsa's sufferings turn the stomach. She was baptised Anna on August 10, 1910, and was probably neurotic quite early on from an overly strict upbringing. At sixteen, while on her way to school, she met a Carmelite nun who urged her to take up a life of self-sacrifice. She took the message to heart, and to prevent the possibility of being married off by the age of eighteen, stood in a pit of burning rice husk and scarred herself so hideously that sex was effectively eliminated from her life. She'd already proved the stuff of which she was made when she joined a convent and was initiated finally into the order.

From that point on the list of ailments grew, starting with severe hemorrhages for which she underwent surgery. Racked by pain, she went without food or sleep for months! As a bride of Christ, she was

given the name of Sister Alphonsa after Saint Alphonus Ligouri. Other ailments were nose bleeds, ulcerated legs, malaria, pneumonia, and tuberculosis, with persistent and violent bouts of vomiting.

No doubt her loving heavenly father was very pleased at the way she took it all. She made this entry in her diary: "I took my perpetual vows on August 12, 1936. From that time it seemed as if a part of the cross of Christ was entrusted to me."

Ironically, none of her contemporaries in the order perceived her greatness. Instead, they accused her of extreme vanity in the way she took her suffering, pontificating to them about the uses of adversity. Said she, "We must be ground and crushed and transformed by suffering. It is when grapes are crushed that we get wine. When God, by suffering purifies us, we become like good wine."

Heady stuff no doubt, for would-be saints, but not the kind of message Indian women want to hear from across the grave at a time when they are no longer prepared to accept the religious obligation to suffer merely to prove their credibility. One seventy-nine-year-old survivor of Alphonsa's time, Sister Seraphina, declares she was an "ordinary nun, but very devout. She kept her vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity with great earnestness."

And of course she dreamed dreams, and foretold the death of people. Father Elias appeared to her in her suffering and reminded her of the "destiny of pain" which was her lot. But he worked a little magic of his own on her behalf and in the morning her leg's ulcers were healed.

The scene at her deathbed was a fitting finale to a life of morbidity and neurosis:

> She smiled at the ring of faces around her bed. And breathing deeply, she asked Sister Gabriel, who was tending her, "Did you hear that sound?" "No," said Sister Gabriel. "Come closer," urged Sister Alphonsa. Taking another breath and releasing it, she said "Does it not sound beautiful? Like music?"

Kerala has a number of orthodox Christian sects, and some of their leaders have expressed disapproval of the circus being planned around the Pope's visit to their state merely for the selling of two saints. Such pomp and pageantry, they say, capitalizes on saints only to enrich the church by bringing in money from devotees. And, of course, Sister Alphonsa is going to prove a big commercial draw when she is honoured. Sacred pictures, medals, talismans, and crosses are already doing a brisk sale. It seems a pity she isn't around to enjoy the fun —

particularly when she gave up so much for so little. But the way these things work, it won't be long before somebody thinks up some really grand miracle which will send her to the top of the class and put her in line for complete canonization. That will really be something for her uncharitable sisters in the convent who suspected her of being something of a pious fraud in her ambition to become a saint and achieve "posthumous greatness" (!).

My own hope is that the Pope confines his activities during his visit only to the religious mumbo jumbo. Indians are aware of his political sentiments, and many resent his visit because of the suspicion that his piety is a cover for other things in every country he visits.

At an immense Hindu conclave held in south India last year a number of leaders suggested he should be banned from visiting India since no Western (Christian) government had ever cared to invite a Hindu *shankaracharya*. Undoubtedly, the visit will bring to the fore the suspicion that Roman Catholics owe greater allegiance to an outside authority than to the country.

The most prickly problem is in the matter of birth control. This is of considerable socio-political significance to us because of the vast vote banks religious communities form in our elections. In remote tribal areas, where Christian missionaries continue to convert through educational institutions and other means at the village level, parochial rivalries are sharpened during elections. Orthodox Hindu opinion is very critical of Mother Teresa's missionary work because she opposes our birth control program and condemns legalized abortion. She also converts people through her work in city slums.

Hindu fundamentalists are bound to react negatively to any statement by the pontiff which appears like downright meddling. We have enough lunacy already infecting our inter-religious relationships without him aggravating matters by pushing his point of view. If any trouble is sparked off, not all the collective powers of the saints will contain a Hindu backlash.

The Parsees — A Threatened Species?

April 1986

The Parsee community is one of the smallest minority groups we have — one Parsee to every 5,500 Indians. They number only 100,000 but have made a remarkable contribution to India's development. In the West, the best-known Parsee is probably Zubin Mehta, the Bombay-born conductor.

The followers of Spiritman Zarathustra, the Enlightened Messenger, arrived on the west coast of India as fugitives from Muslim persecution in Iran some time between A.D. 716 and A.D. 936.

They venerate fire, and legend says they brought with them their sacred fire called *Iranshah*. Landing in Gujarat, they obtained permission from the Hindu king to settle in his realm and built their first temple to enshrine the *Iranshah*.

In Udvada, a Parsee spiritual center of great sanctity, is found a flame which has burned continuously for 1,265 years. Miraculous powers are attributed to this fire, and it is regarded as the highest of the three types of fire venerated by Zoroastrians, actually being sixteen different types of fire collected and joined together. In ancient Persia, the royal chapel called the Atash Behram alone enshrined the first-grade fire. Now when such a chapel is to be consecrated, a strict ritual is observed in collecting the fifteen fires — from a burning corpse, the workshops of a dyer, brewer, distiller, brick-maker, goldsmith or alchemist, ironsmith, armourer, baker, distiller, idol-worshipper, the hearth of a ruler or king, shepherd, ascetic, soldier, traveler, and any Zoroastrian home, fire from a mint, and from atmospheric electricity like lightning. This last is usually the most difficult to obtain.

The entire consecration ceremony takes a year. And the sacred flame at Udvada was held up for lack of lightning. Ahura Mazda (god) then appeared to the priest in a dream and told him to pray for nine days. On the ninth day, god sent his heavenly fire in the form of a bolt of lightning. The sacred flame is tended by nine priestly families, descendants of the first priests who led the faithful from Iran. A Parsee place of worship is called a Fire Temple or Agiary (*Ag* meaning fire).

In ancient times the priesthood dominated the Persian state and directed the emperor himself. When Islam swept through the empire, the priests led their followers into exile rather than submit. They were scattered far and wide, though about 27,000 were known to exist in Iran before the Shah was overthrown.

In India for some generations, the community remained rural until they moved into coastal ports in western India like Bombay and Surat where the East India Company's ships docked. Today they are a highly urbanized community and associated particularly with the metropolis city of Bombay, to whose growth and development they have made a significant contribution.

A spirit of enterprise, dynamism, and sheer hard work helped earn them a name in every sphere. The first shipbuilders in Bombay were Parsees, many of whose ships sailed in British fleets during the American War of Independence. There were also Parsee shipyards in Calcutta, and shippers whose clippers traded with China and the Far East. In Bombay they set up cotton mills and ginning factories. They devised an essentially Indian system of banking. Some of the city's streets are named after eminent men who served in the civil administration and the judiciary. There are statues honoring those Parsee leaders who were active in the nationalist movement. The first maternity hospital in Bombay was founded by a Parsee — the first woman to qualify in medicine.

By the 1830s, Parsees had begun to make their mark in Calcutta, the original capital of the British government in India. They acted as Justices of the Peace and were appointed as judges. The first Indian Sheriff of Calcutta was a Parsee.

They have been active in journalism, some founding their own papers in English and Gujarati. The pioneers in nuclear research in India have been Parsees. The foundations of our modern steel industry were laid by a Parsee who also started the country's only international airline. They have earned names for themselves as innovators in our film industry, in theatre, in painting and literature. They have also excelled in law, in the field of education, and in our armed forces. The first Indian created a Field Marshal is a Parsee.

In addition, the community has endowed educational and charitable trusts, set up centers for treatment of cancer, established hospitals, schools, and orphanages. Wealthy trusts also provide travel grants and scholarships for deserving students who wish to go abroad and specialize. Charity is a religious necessity and forms a fundamental precept of the Zoroastrian faith. "The strength of *Ahura* (god) is given unto him who is a protector of the poor."

According to tradition, Zarathustra was born in Balkh somewhere in the sixth or seventh century B.C. After receiving enlightenment from Ahura Mazda, he went to preach at the court of King Vistasp at the age of forty-two. After spreading his teachings far and wide, he was killed at the age of seventy-seven while praying in the fire-temple in Balkh (now a place in modern Afghanistan). The bases of his teachings are *Humata, Hukta,* and *Huvarshta* — good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.

By the age of seven, every Parsee girl and boy goes through an initiation ceremony, after which they are duty-bound to observe the rules and religious customs imposed by Zoroastrianism. Each is then obliged to wear a white cambric undergarment next to the skin and a sacred thread of lamb's wool symbolizing righteousness, purity, and innocence.

After centuries of close contact with the Hindus of their adopted country, many marriage customs and ceremonies have been modified. For instance, red pigment is applied to the foreheads of the bride and groom — a long vertical one on the man's brow symbolizing a ray of the sun, the fructifying agent in nature, and a round mark on the bride's forehead symbolizing the moon, which absorbs the rays of the sun and represents the conceiving agent. Rice is stuck onto the marks as a symbol of prosperity and plenty.

The red pigment is a carry-over from the time animals were sacrificed to avert evil and the blood applied to the forehead. Today an egg is instead passed over their heads three times and smashed on the ground as a sacrifice.

One aspect of Zoroastrian belief which has a morbid kind of fascination for others is their custom of exposing their dead to be devoured by vultures and other scavenging birds in Towers of Silence. A cardinal precept in their creed is to preserve the purity of fire, air, water, and earth. The disposal of the dead, therefore, cannot be done by cremation, burial, or in rivers and the ocean. By surrendering their bodies to the birds, they believe they perform the final act of charity.

A Tower of Silence is a massive stone structure with a circular platform within consisting of stone slabs on which bodies are laid. There

are separate rows for men, women, and children. There is a deep central well filled with charcoal, sand, and lime into which the bones slide after being picked clean by the birds. There are, however, many out-spoken members in the community who are not only against this primitive custom, but prefer electrical cremation as more aesthetic and sanitary, despite what their religion teaches.

The Parsee religion is one of the most exclusive Indians have. Nobody can convert to Zoroastrianism. One must be born a Parsee. A couple of years ago an American scholar of the faith wished to embrace it, and so profound was his understanding of its tenets, that Parsee priests in the United States inducted him. Here in India, a furious debate raged in the press and protest meetings were held denouncing this act as against the interests of the entire community.

Rules are as stringent on questions of marriage. A Parsee male marrying outside the faith may bring his children up as Parsee; a Parsee female may not. No outsider is ever allowed into an Agiary. Prominent notices declare that non-Parsees may not enter. This is to preserve the purity of the temple. A Parsee cannot share his/her religious privileges with a non-Parsee spouse. Even within the home, particularly in rituals surrounding death, a non-Parsee spouse is completely excluded.

Such strictures ensure that followers of the faith remain within it by marrying only Parsees. But with such a small community, generations of in-breeding has resulted in widespread genetic deformities, mental retardation, and congenital disease. No survey has actually been done, but wherever a large number of the community is gathered it is normal to see grotesque deformities, curvature of the spine, and much else. In homes, there are many cases of imbecility and senility.

Interestingly, some of the exclusiveness practiced by the community is racial. I once had a Parsee male try and convince me that Parsees have a higher pulse rate, different vibrations, and more intense aura than ordinary mortals! Color consciousness is evident in their refusal to intermarry, though there are many Parsees who are not of pure and original Iranian stock. The early settlers in Gujarat intermarried with local Indians, and the swarthiness of their skin is evidence of mixed racial strains.

It is likely that religious narrowness will bring about the extinction of this remarkable community in another few generations. And even though many of those with a pragmatic and modern outlook are marrying non-Parsees, the genetic havoc caused by intensive in-breeding is unlikely to be undone. The only hope for the community is to welcome outsiders into its fold to revitalize its stock — a suggestion which is usually met with indignation and horror by the more pious.

Go Ye Therefore, etc. (Matt. 28:19)

June 1986

Well, the circus has left! He has been and went — I mean, the Vicar of Christ, the 264th successor to St. Peter. He came originally as a "state guest," invited by the President of India, the first-ever pope to be officially invited. But somehow some higher power took over, and the entire show took on the aspect of a triumphal procession in Roman tradition. The eighteen-day tour of India was the longest ever taken by a pope, and the crowds which thronged airports, roads, and public grounds were probably the largest Karol Josef Wojtyla ever saw — a testimony to the seriousness with which we are spawning ourselves into extinction by cherishing as sacred our capacity for irresponsible sex.

Not until the last day of the visit did the man speak out on the one single topic that keeps the entire hierarchy of bachelors in the Roman Catholic Church from getting their sleep — contraception and abortion.

But, to begin at the beginning, the point at which he stepped down from the Alitalia aircraft and kissed our blessed soil. After the "official" part of his visit was done, the Indian administration of the Roman Catholic Church put the show on the road to far-flung corners of the land. The pope greeted teeming crowds in the Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, Khasi, Tamil, Konkani, Malayalam, and Marathi languages. Public mass was celebrated with all the panoply of the priesthood in fancy dress costume — solid phalanxes of Indian Roman Catholic clergy, with nuns in separate enclosures. At the mass in Goa, at the Basilica of Bom Jesus, where the supposed body of Francis Xavier lives on, the male celibates filled the stalls inside, and their devout sisters

knelt outside. Afterwards, the pope left with a fine promise to the nuns. Said he, "Today I have a message for you . . . the message is that next time you will sit inside the church, and your brother priests outside."

Indian crowds love a good show of magnificence and splendor, particularly when it comes to religion. Enormous sums of money were spent on erecting the special podia from which he led his sheep — sorry, flock — in public prayer. Press reports said each Roman Catholic family was asked to contribute twenty-five rupees towards the cost of the tour. The money was well-spent, making even some pious people protest. In Trivandrum, in Kerala, 300,000 rupees were used to erect a podium, and that roused Hindu sentiment because it came up on a spot on the beach used twice a year for immersing a Hindu idol. They feared the Roman Catholics would refuse to dismantle the platform and make it a permanent Christian site. In Calcutta, the elaborate platform cost 700,000 rupees. Security arrangements were inconspicuous, and on occasion the pontiff directly approached and touched the faithful, inspiring the Archbishop of Delhi to speak of the "electric waves" of his hands as he placed them on people's heads. A bullet-proof popemobile ferried him through crowds. Of course, the highlight of his visit was to Mother Teresa's Mission in Calcutta.

In his final address in Bombay, the pope quoted from the Second Vatican Council of 1965, from Mahatma Gandhi, and from Tagore to reiterate the Roman Catholic stand against contraception and abortion. His speech was undoubtedly prepared by cannier minds within the clergy who know that you can't fault people like Gandhi or Tagore before an Indian audience. The references were made in a sermon on the role of the family in building a new world of peace.

He had nice things to say about us. He said the Indian family presents certain encouraging aspects — one, in the esteem given to mutual fidelity, two, the worthy efforts being made to promote the dignity of women, three, the care of parents for their children, and four vice versa.

He then spoke at length, with insight an old bachelor could arrive at only from some divine inspiration, about the relationship between married couples who "through the responsible transmission of life, gladly accept children as a sign of fruitfulness and a gift of God."

In support of this dubious gifting he referred to Rabindranath Tagore, "your own Indian sage," who said that every baby born brings with it the message that god has not lost faith in mankind.

I was unaware that Tagore said this. If he did, he shouldn't be surprised to find himself in such peculiar company today.

Gandhi's views on this whole messy business of procreation and the

obligation of a husband to impregnate his wife were given a uniquely Indian twist by the pope. The "suspension of procreation" was to be brought about "not by immoral or artificial checks, but by a life of discipline and self-control. . . . Moral results can only be produced by moral restraints." Thus was Rome's Rhythm Method transformed at once into an essentially Hindu concept of enforced continence for purely spiritual reasons!

In a sly reference to abortion — sensibly legalized here — the pope said that "all human life is sacred from the moment of conception. It is the task of all mankind to reject whatever wounds, weakens, or destroy's human life."

Before the pontiff's visit and during it, there was a section among Hindus which openly criticized the government's invitation. Processions were taken out in protest, and marchers carried placards demanding that the pope go back. They declared he had come only to proselytize. Though his effigy was burnt in some places, no riots were sparked off.

We have among our many fundamentalist organizations a large group calling itself Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council — *world* signifying the extent of their total vision — like froggies in a pond). The VHP is an arm of the extreme rightist RSS, a socio-political organization said to have been behind the assassination of Gandhi because of his appeasement of the Muslims at the time of Partition. It stands for Hindu nationalism — equating patriotism with Hindu culture.

The general secretary of the VHP, a former member of the RSS, denounced the visit in an interview with the press. He declared that 200,000 Hindus were to be converted during the visit. This kind of talk always rouses strong passions, because we have reduced all our democratic processes to a complex game of numbers. Two hundred thousand converts to Christianity means a drastic depletion of the Hindu voting block.

Quizzed about this mass conversion, Cardinal Picachy dismissed the fear as unfounded. Picachy is high in the Indian hierarchy, formerly archbishop of Calcutta and President of the Catholic Bishops Council of India. As cardinal, he was part of the conclave which elected John Paul I and John Paul II.

"The Pope is not coming to convert. No man converts. It is Christ who converts," he said, "through the instrumentality of others." That is as neat a way of putting it as any!

Did the general secretary of the VHP anticipate a Hindu backlash? The answer given offers a clue to the growing antagonism evident today

toward both Muslim and Christian Indians on the part of orthodox Hindus.

"I cannot forecast such an event," he said,

> but I do feel that the Hindus should unite particularly when it comes to the point when hundreds and thousands [!] of their people are being converted to other religions. Let me make it very clear that when anyone changes to another religion which does not belong to this land, they become antinational. It is as simple as that, and we have seen ample evidence of this. There is already a demand for a separate Christian homeland. [!] They are already demanding changes of names of towns and villages in the north-eastern states and parts of south India. The Muslim and Christian population is increasing. [This is a strike at the Muslim and Catholic refusal to practice birth control.] In some border areas Hindus are becoming a minority. And therefore, to us nothing matters as much as the disintegration of our country and our society.

The English press seems euphoric at the way the visit went, implying that a good time was had by all. But nothing has really changed — no mutual hatreds have been buried, no suspicions allayed. If anything, the very success of the circus has created more alarm over the actual strength of the Roman Catholic Church in India.

Liberalism Loses Out?

July 1986

Dr. Malmoona Khanam, a Muslim and a lecturer in Urdu and Persian in a college in this state, was married in 1970, bore two sons, and then suddenly found herself divorced on the ground that she was an Atheist. Her husband had consulted a *mullah* at a well-known center of Islamic studies in another state and had been advised that Islam does not allow a man to remain married to an Atheist. He was granted a divorce decree without anyone caring to ascertain her views on the matter.

Madina Mulla of Poona, twenty-four years of age and also a Muslim, has already gone through three marriages and is now destitute. Her first husband deserted her within three weeks of marriage, but she bore him a daughter and was maintained by her brother, who got her married a second time. But this time her mother-in-law ill-treated her, saying all she'd brought in her dower was another man's daughter, an extra mouth to feed. She bore the second man a son and then discovered that he intended to sell her.

With two children to support, she returned to her brother's home. His wife, however, now objected to the extra burden, so she was married a third time. This man, a drunkard and gambler, beat her often and never gave her enough money to run the home. He harassed her and often made her sit up all night beside him, pressing his legs. Her mother finally took her back. She now supports herself as a domestic servant and her two children have been placed in an orphanage.

I have taken these two case histories from a report in the *Times of India*, dated February 22, 1986. They were among other stories narrated by a group of divorced Muslim women brought to Delhi by a

women's anti-dowry organization and by the Poona-based Muslim reformist group, the *Muslim Satyashodhak Mandal*. They were in the capital to present memorandums to the President and Prime Minister, urging that the scope of existing secular laws be extended to include Muslim women, without reference to the *Shariat* or to private religious courts set up by the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board. Their protest coincides with the introduction of a bill in Parliament called The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill, 1986. It is opposed not only by liberals within the Muslim community and many Muslim women victimized by religious laws, but by some members of Rajiv Gandhi's own party. This morning's paper (February 26, 1986) reports the resignation of a Muslim minister from his Council of Ministers. He has quit, he says, because the legislation contemplated by the government goes against the spirit of the Supreme Court's judgment in the much-publicized Shah Bano Case, of which I wrote earlier. ("Stirring A Hornet's Nest?" in *American Atheist*.

My purpose in writing this piece is to demonstrate just how bigotry bedevils the simplest issues in this country. The question is one of human rights, but fundamentalist leaders within the Muslim community have wasted no time in acting. The bill, Mr. Gandhi declares, is actually a boon to Muslim women. He betrays a certain naïveté here. In reality, he has been forced to opt for a path of least resistance to placate fundamentalist sentiment, or run the risk of losing the support of the vast Muslim voting block.

The Supreme Court had held that a divorced Muslim woman, unable to support herself, could claim alimony from her former husband. This sparked off nationwide demonstrations with Muslims marching in numbers and denouncing what they regarded as an interference in their religion. Some burnt effigies of the Supreme Court judge.

The present bill declares that a Muslim divorced woman will be entitled to a reasonable and fair provision and maintenance within the *iddat* period of three months stipulated by the *Shariat*. Maintenance of any children born from the marriage might be extended to two years from the date of birth of a child. She will get back whatever she brought by way of dower at the time of marriage. These clauses are clearly to placate orthodox opinion.

Thereafter, a husband's obligation being over, a divorced wife, if unable to maintain herself, must be looked after by her relatives. If she has none, or they are too poor to maintain her, then the magistrate may order that she be maintained by a special board of the state.

Shah Bano, the elderly woman who was divorced after forty-three

years of marriage and who had the temerity to fight for ten years to get the court to order her rich lawyer husband to pay her alimony of 500 rupees a month, has initiated a major upheaval in her community the significance of which she herself will never comprehend. She has been reviled and threatened by her devout neighbours, and others were instigated to stone her house. She had to ask for police protection. Intimidated by *maulanas* and *mullahs* of the faith, she finally backed down on her claim declaring that Islamic law must remain supreme.

There are probably as many Muslim women as men who denounce the Supreme Court judgment, even though it offers them a way out of unjust medieval religious sanctions. Rumour soon spread that Shah Bano had been instigated by Hindus who want to destroy the Muslim faith. An angry woman teacher in a backward region of Uttar Pradesh declared,

> Once we are divorced and the man has met his obligations of *mehr* [dower], he becomes *ghair* [a stranger] for us. We must observe *Purdah* from him, and his money is *haram* [obnoxious and sinful].

A colleague endorsed this benighted sentiment by declaring, "We will resist this decision even if that means we have to become *shaheeds* [martyrs]."

The cry raised by the men is "*Shariat Bachao*!" ("Save the *Shariat*!"), and if it can be done at the cost of denying women dignity and justice, there is nothing to prevent it. The Koran clearly states they are an inferior lot.

> Men are superior to women on account of the qualities with which God hath gifted the one above the other, and on account of the outlay they make from their substance. Virtuous women are obedient, careful during the husband's absence, because God hath of them been careful. But chide those whose refractoriness ye have cause to fear; remove them into beds apart, and scourge them. But if they are obedient to you, then seek not occasion against them.

The community stands divided vertically, the bigoted against a liberal minority. Orthodoxy remains unaffected even by the veneer of education. Dr. Sharifunnisa Ansari, professor and head of the department of Persian studies of Hyderabad's prestigious Osmania University declares,

> I have travelled to more than ten countries mainly in the Arab world and discovered that no self-respecting woman receives money from the man who divorces her. The *Shariat* is clear about this and according to some rumors Shah Bano was taken to court by interested Hindus who want a uniform civil code in the country.

It might seem ironical that a move to evolve just laws inspired by common sense and reason has been tranformed into a monstrous bogey to exacerbate communal hatred. But this is how religions operate in this country. "For the Muslims today," said one bigot, "the imminent danger is to their culture and identity."

Dr. Taher Mehmood of Delhi University, an authority on Muslim history and law in India, says

> If you look at it from the eyes of the Muslim, he is saying: "You have already taken away everything else that was so valuable to my faith. Now I will not let you take away the last of my valuable possessions — my personal law."

And yet three-quarters of it has already been replaced by a uniform criminal law, without any identity crisis evident!

Fundamentalists and politicians have all jumped on the bandwagon to endorse the cry that Islam is in grave danger. They have hustled Rajiv Gandhi into introducing the present bill into Parliament. Its fate will be decided in the coming weeks.

Liberal opinion in the community speaks with the voice of sanity. Shahid Siddiqui, editor of a leading Urdu weekly, said:

> Every small town *maulana* has become a leader now with narrow objectives and narrow interest. If the controversy is not resolved quickly, these people will take the community behind by two to three decades.

The ultimate lesson to be learnt is a familiar one — only women can change their status through an educated awareness and a refusal to be victimized for any reason whatsoever, even if it is embedded in holy writ propagated by men to serve their own ends.

Bhatty, Margaret. "Stirring a Hornet's Nest?" In the *American Atheist*, edited by Robin Murray-O'Hair, January 1986, vol. 28, no. 1. Austin, Tx: American Atheist Press.

The Times of India. Newspaper. Bombay edition, dated Feb. 22, 1986.

The Girl Child

October 1986

A verse in the ancient Hindu scripture called the Atharvaveda says, "If girls must be born at all, let them be born to others. Let only sons be born in this home." Traditionalists like to recall that Indian women enjoyed unqualified freedom in ancient days. But a deep-rooted chauvinist bias has always prevailed in India. And the mythical emancipated woman of two thousand years ago offers no comfort to her downtrodden sister of today.

How much has changed for Indian women since those times? At the close of the United Nations Decade for Women, a number of well-known women did a serious reappraisal of exactly what had been achieved in this country.

The statistics are not encouraging. Bride-burning is on the increase. But perhaps the figure has always been high, and what used to be passed off as "a kitchen accident" is now forced into the open by women's organizations as downright murder.

Incidents of rape and violence against women have shown an upward trend. Perhaps here, too, the figures are not higher, but the number of cases brought to book are much higher. More victims come forward to give evidence because of the supportiveness of women's groups. Policewomen are now deputed to book cases of rape, helped by social workers. But the public attitude toward sexual violence in Indian society is easily gauged by the behavior of male audiences in cinema shows. They wildly cheer and clap rape scenes, shouting obscene encouragement to the rapist.

In urban areas, the single woman is no longer regarded as such an

oddity, though gossip will readily imply that she is getting her sex. She is still, however, an object of pity to those who are convinced that women's sole role is to fulfill their biological destiny of marrying and producing children.

More women have stood as candidates in our last two general elections. In 1980, there were 142 female contestants for the 542 seats in our central parliament, and in 1984 there were 134. (The lower figure was because no elections were held in the riot-torn states of Assam and Punjab.) In law enforcement, in administration and law, in aviation, medicine, engineering, business and commerce, and even in highly specialized areas of scientific research, Indian women are making it to the top.

But this is a limited view. For the masses of Indian women, there exists a grimmer reality. There is still the image of woman battered and burned, or driven by despair to suicide, of woman sold into bondage, and of the girl child not allowed to survive by a callous process of neglect. The dazzling success of a few cannot obscure the misery of the many. Education and social change, along with a willingness to discard antihuman religious concepts, are slow in coming. The female literacy rate is half that of males, and the gap is widening with more and more girls dropping out of school in rural areas.

A Girl Is Born

The prejudice against females begins at birth. The girl child is a burden destined to drain her family's resources at marriage. The birth of a son is a matter for jubilation and distribution of sweets. The girl baby's arrival is greeted with gloom, and the mother herself is assailed by feelings of personal failure.

During the past two years, a small feminist group has been touring districts in this state of Maharastra, staging a play called *Mulghi Zhali Ho* (A Girl is Born). The response it received from village women has astonished the group. Every show was packed, and posters and booklets sold out. Village schoolgirls were its most avid supporters. But the regional press reflected the traditional male bias against feminist activities. It denounced the group as anti-men, anti-children, Westernized (meaning degenerate!), and a jean-clad bunch given to smoking, drinking, and promiscuity. (A lack of virtue is the most serious character defect an Indian woman can have!)

As long as the excessive prejudice against females remains rooted in traditions inspired by religion, not much will change. A young American

sociologist, married to an Indian trade unionist and settled in western Maharastra, told me how upper-class feminists she had worked with in Bombay were once unprepared to accept this premise. Now, ten years later, many realize that religion must change — or go.

In a patrilineal society such as ours it is obligatory to have sons for purposes of inheritance. In many families they are potential wage-earners and will bring wealth by way of dowry. The soul of a Hindu cannot find salvation without a son to carry out funeral rites and thereafter all the other meticulous obsequies imposed by religion.

The girl child holds out no prospect of gain. In poorer families she is forced to subsist on minimal levels of nutrition. Already debilitated in health, she will marry and become a mother even in her teens. A high rate of infant mortality can be traced to this factor alone. In 1901 the sex ratio was 972 females to every 1,000 males. Today it stands at 935 females and is likely to fall further.

Infanticide

Female infanticide, through the custom of exposing a newborn girl child to the elements, or killing her by putting poison on the nursing mother's nipples, was made a crime during British rule. Infanticide has now taken more subtle forms, the most sophisticated being abortion after a sex test. But after an unwanted girl child is born, it is impossible to draw a line between deliberate and callous neglect of the child in matters of nourishment and medical attention and cold-blooded murder. The means might differ, but the end remains the same.

In June our leading national news magazine, *India Today*, broke a lead story titled "Born to Die." It concerned the custom of female infanticide prevalent in a rural group in Taml Nadu called Kallars. Oleander berries mashed in milk are fed to girl babies to poison them. The reason given for the custom is the excessively high demand for dowry when a daughter is married. The Kallars also believe that the more girl children killed in a family, the more it will be blessed by sons. The mothers on their part blame their failure to produce sons on a wretched destiny. A Kallar husband will not visit his wife in hospital if she bears a girl. And many maternity homes and hospitals report that women producing girls disappear from the wards. When they return to be treated for milk-clotting, they say the baby died of a fever.

The Kallars were formerly a martial caste enlisted as soldiers by south Indian rulers. Today they work as landless farm labourers. Female infanticide is accepted practice among the two hundred

thousand members of the caste. It has increased considerably in the last fifteen years. No police records have been made, and no criminal action taken against the killers. In one district, a hospital recorded 600 female births in a year; of these, 570 were spirited away by the mothers immediately after birth. Ironically, even in homes where grieving women confessed to infanticide, they vigorously defended the dowry system because of the bright promise of instant riches when their sons were married.

Another means of killing a girl child is by stuffing her mouth with paddy grains on which she will choke when she inhales. If that doesn't work, there is the *madar* plant (*calotropis gigantea*). Some husbands grow a *madar* in their courtyards as soon as their wives conceive. If a girl child is born, the juice from the plant is used to kill her. Contraception has not yet reached the Kallars. With their lack of education, it will hardly impress them as useful knowledge. No government agency or social workers have made any progress in dealing with this appalling situation.

In a society dominated by a life-negating philosophy, other-worldly considerations colour all values. Life is so diminished in significance that homicide for any reason whatever is just a step from one room into the next. And the "souls" of the 6,000 baby girls poisoned in one district alone in the past ten years (when we were observing the UN Decade for Women) were merely transients on their way from Here to There. They came in with the seeds of their own destruction sown in some former existence. And no doubt they moved on to the next life with a more favourable karmic balance on the books for having expiated for those sins. The unfortunate mothers who spawned them have learned that they are not born to shape their own destiny but to endure it. Their suffering is also a carry-over of a sinful past. Thus does a savage and callous tradition assume moral significance in which defeat is transmuted into Fate and death elevated to Destiny.

Cleansing The Ganges

November 1986

On June 14, Rajiv Gandhi launched an ambitious project to restore the Ganges river to its pristine purity. Fittingly, the function took place in the Hindu holy city of Benares, now known as Varanasi and also referred to as Kashi. To the pious, the Ganges is Ganga Mata, Ganga Mayya, or Mother Ganges. Benares is the most sacred of Indian cities.

All major Indian rivers enjoy a certain status of sacredness and form a "pantheon of rivers." But there is no explanation for the special sentiment attached to Benares. The agnostic reformer Buddha first preached his doctrine here, and it is still a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists. The city probably assumed its eminence during the subsequent revival of Hinduism and the persecution of Buddhists which virtually drove the religion from India.

A great deal of superstitious belief centers on the magical qualities of the Ganges. Many believe it supernaturally cleanses itself of all contamination, both spiritual — in the form of sins washed off by sinners, and material — in the shape of disease germs and filth. Were this possible, the exchequer would have been saved a sum of rupees (Rs) equal to eighty-four crores in this project. (a crore equals 10 million)

Ironically, as Benares prepared itself for the colourful inauguration, two major sewers burst, pouring quantities of raw sewage into the sacred stream. This was in addition to the six major and sixty-one minor drains that already feed one hundred million liters into it. Also, holy Ganga Mata takes to her broad bosom the half burnt corpses of 10,000 Hindus, along with 60,000 animal carcases. Each year more than 30,000 funeral pyres are lit on the city's cremation *ghats* and the ashes floated down the river.

According to tradition, the bodies of children and *sadhus* (holy Hindu mendicants) are not cremated but consigned to the waters. Along almost its entire course of 1,560 miles, the Ganges receives raw sewage and industrial effluents from the cities on its banks. Upstream from Benares itself, chemicals are poured into the holy river from coal yards, a paper mill, an insecticide plant, and glassworks. Each year, over 70,000 pilgrims and tourists to the city put an additional strain on its already over-extended water and sanitation systems.

The inauguration of the Ganges project was marked by the usual rhetoric from politicians without which we can't seem to get off the ground. Nine girls in regional costumes brought brass pots of water drawn from nine other major rivers and emptied them into a large one filled with Ganges water. This was to symbolize an ideal that still eludes us — national integration. In his speech, the prime minister urged us to uphold the unity and integrity of India by shunning the forces of separatism, violence, parochialism, and regionalism.

The opposition parties had called a shutters-down strike in the city, which received only a partial response. But it remains to be seen whether the Ganges Project will finally fall foul of bigotry. The pious are unprepared to see their ancient traditions changed for any valid reason. The government might succeed in forcing industries to conform to anti-pollution measures and establish sewage treatment plants along the river's course. But this still leaves the most obnoxious source of pollution — the disposal of the dead.

Considering the total lack of concern for the purity of a river one calls Mother, how can we explain the intense religious emotion aroused by the Ganges in most Hindus?

Mother Ganges

In his book, *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru describes the Ganges as a river which

> has held India's heart captive and drawn uncounted millions to her banks since the dawn of history. The story of the Ganges, from her source to the sea, from old times to new, is the story of India's civilization and culture, of the rise and fall of empires, of great and proud cities, of the adventures of men. . . .

The pious, however, do not take such a secular view. They cite countless scriptural myths telling of the divine origin of the river. A

Hindu is cleansed of all sin when bathing in its waters, and even repeating the name, "O Ganga! O Ganga!" with reverence earns atonement for sins of three former existences. To be cremated on its banks gives a direct passage to heaven. Often, the sick and the aged will renounce the world and go to Benares or other sacred spots along the river to achieve this end.

Bathing in the Ganges, drinking its water, and carrying it home in vessels for use in religious ritual confers great merit. Its "shelf life" is said to be a whole year despite it being the most polluted river we have!

The origin of the cult of water in Hinduism is not easily explained. But with the climate of the peninsula, its heat and drought, and the dependence on a single monsoon season for rain, we can see why water assumes almost mystical significance.

Indologist Nirad Chaudhuri, in his controversial book, *The Continent of Circe*, traces the water cult to the Aryans who migrated to the subcontinent more than 2,500 years ago. As a pastoral people coming from central Europe, their tribal memory was of the Danube, Dnieper, Don, or Volga. They settled first in the land of many rivers, now the Punjab, and the Ganges formed one boundary of their earliest kingdoms. Unused to the torrid climate, they came to attach ritual purity to bathing and the use of water in religious ceremonies. Today, Hindus going on pilgrimage use the word *tirtha*, referring to the place of pilgrimage. But its original Sanskrit meaning was "a bathing place on a river bank."

There are four very sacred places along the Ganges for ritual bathing. One is at Hardwar where the river breaks through the Siwalik Range, 300 miles from its source in the Himalayas. An important cyclical bathing festival was held here earlier this year. Over three million Hindus converged on the place to take a holy dip. The auspicious times for bathing are fixed by astrologers studying the conjunction of planets, and during eclipses.

Monastic sects of *sahdus*, whose members have renounced the world and go nude, first descend into the water and thus purify it for the pilgrims. Over five-hundred thousand of them were present in Hardwar this time. In the rush to get to the water during the auspicious hours, a stampede took place and about fifty pilgrims were trampled to death.

The second sacred place is lower down the Ganges, at Garh-Mukteswar. The third is at Allahabad, where the Jumna (Yamuna) joins it, along with a mythical river from Vedic times called the Saraswati. The fourth holy place is Benares. The 1954 bathing at Allahabad was regarded as a perfect auspicious time, one that will not come around

again for 108 years (140, according to other scholars). Between two to five million pilgrims swarmed to the riverside after the march of the naked *sadhus*. In the stampede over five hundred died, but the number was probably higher since many bodies were carried away by the river. For many of the pious, this appalling death was a passage straight to heaven.

Travelogue writer Eric Newby describes the crowd in his book, *Ganga: Sacred River of India*. The sound of the concourse is like the "whirring noise of a great nest of winged insects that has been disturbed," he says.

> All the bathers — lepers with fingers like charred rope; Brahmins wearing sacred threads, ninety-six handbreadths long; enormous *banyas* (merchants) and their equally enormous wives; high court judges; old Harrovians; old Etonians; old Paulines; Indian Army officers with bushy moustaches who were cadets at Sandhurst, and their madams — all these and the little bands of peasants, men and women from the villages of India, who make up the vast majority of the pilgrims — all submerge themselves in the Ganga, Jumna, and the Saraswati, drinking the water, taking it in their cupped hands and letting it run three times through their fingers, healthy and diseased, rich and poor together. For this is the water that washes all sin.

Nirad Chaudhuri compares the movement of millions of Hindus to the river to the march of the lemmings:

> The spectacle is awe-inspiring, and the disgust which such blind obedience to superstition would otherwise have roused is inhibited by the mere scale of the obedience. I do not think anybody who has not seen these Hindu movements will find it easy to believe that a collective *idée fixe* can produce a hyperkinesis of this order. The spectacle has become so familiar that the people of India no longer even try to understand it.

Ritual bathing in Benares is a continuous process at its five most sacred flighted *ghats* leading down to the river, each to be visited in a special order in a day. Other *ghats* are reserved for washermen, for landing goods and passengers from boats, and for burning the dead. The city is full of temples, ashrams, and resthouses for pilgrims.

The Lord of Death

To die in Benares is to achieve paradise. To be cremated there and have one's ashes scattered on the Ganges also assures one of heaven. Night and day, the dead are brought into the city by bus, bullock cart, rickshaw, and train, or on foot. Death makes all equal, wiping out caste distinctions, for Yama, the Lord of Death here, is the lowest of the low, an untouchable even among the untouchables, a Dom — but a Raja nonetheless, for he controls the traffic into heaven. A funeral pyre can be lit only with fire taken from the pit in his palace courtyard overlooking the burning *ghat*. This fire has not gone out for thousands of years. Legend also says that the Dom Raja's family were formerly Brahmins who angered the god Shiv so that he condemned them to this gruesome vocation forever. Mourners must satisfy his demands, otherwise the departed soul will suffer. People pledge their land and possessions, but he usually takes payment in cash and grain.

Each body needs forty kilograms of wood. Considering that two hundred bodies are cremated in a day on this particular *ghat* alone, the depletion of fuel is mind-boggling in a country where ecologists predict our forest resources will run only another twenty years.

The Dom Raja's servants usually do not let wood be totally consumed in one pyre. It is tossed into the river, along with the half-burned remains of the corpse, and later retrieved by boatmen to sell again. Dogs raised on human flesh swim out and feed on the body along with swooping kites. Nothing is wasted. Vagrant children snatch away the coconuts placed on the pyre by mourners and gleefully eat them. The poor carry off embers to cook their food, and bathers and washermen hold out their wet clothes to dry by the heat of the flames. The next day, when the ashes have cooled, the Dom Raja's henchmen sift through them for melted gold and jewelry worn by the dead person.

The Dom Raja is among the richest men in Benares, but no one will mix with him. He maintains forty-five servants and a huge horde of relatives from his gruesome earnings. But he hankers after a social life in which he could wear his seventeen expensive Western suits and speak English. His late father carried a gold-tipped trident in the streets warning people to avoid his polluting person. But the present Raja cannot break away from his vocation. It is his *dharam* — his caste duty, his Fate, decreed by god and therefore immutable. The stench of the burning pyre often makes it hard for him to swallow his food, he declares, but he cannot escape his destiny, so he deadens his senses by drinking heavily.

The government intends to erect two electric crematoriums near this *ghat* — a move which has roused strong feeling among those who refuse to see their rites and rituals changed for any reason whatever. There is already a group of bigots preparing to forestall this scheme. The Raja's huge clan declare they will lay down their lives to defend their hereditary right as guardians of a sacred tradition.

Our metropolitan cities have crematoriums which are used by all communities. But most of the orthodox Hindus prefer the funeral pyre. Those who can afford it then carry the ashes to the Ganges, other sacred rivers, or to the seashore, and cast them on the water.

We have a crematorium here in Nagpur which closed down within weeks of being commissioned because no one was prepared to use it. Undoubtedly, any effort to try and change people's customs in order to keep the Ganges clean is bound to prove an uphill task. And where those efforts threaten benighted belief, there are fanatics enough, all prepared to fight to the finish.

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Is Time Running Out in Punjab?

December 1986

A headline in this morning's paper of June 12 reads "Panic Conversions in Punjab." The report tells of how some terrorized Hindus are hastily embracing Sikhism to save themselves from being gunned down by murder squads roaming the state, indulging in both random and selective killings. But even if a man sports a beard, turban, and other outward tokens of a Sikh, he may not escape death. Though attacks on Hindus are more common, Sikhs have been killed because of bitter infighting within the community. Many Hindus isolated in the countryside in dominantly Sikh villages are moving out of the state. The present strategy of Sikh terrorism is one which the fanatic, Sant Bindranwale, had sworn to achieve — a demographic shift in the Hindu and Sikh communities which would create a Khalistan without any outside help, by sheer force of numbers.

The killing of innocent Hindus has led to reprisal killings by militant Hindus. Sikh businessmen in Delhi have received murder threats. For some time now newspapers have been advertising properties and industries in Punjab in exchange for ones in other states. Many Sikh businesses in outside states are moving their assets to Punjab. The signs are ominous, reminding us of pre-Partition times in 1947 when one of the bloodiest migrations in human history took place with the exchange of masses of Hindus and Muslims in the creation of Pakistan. Are we now destined to witness a similar bloodbath, this time engulfing Hindu and Sikh?

When the Punjab accord was signed in July 1985 between Rajiv Gandhi and the Sikh political leaders of the Shiromani Akali Dal, few

cared to comment on the fact that the central government had given in to religious militancy. The accord was not a political breakthrough at all.

In the elections held subsequent to the signing of the accord, Mr. Gandhi's Congress (I) party was almost delighted to concede victory to the Akali Dal, which set about forming a government. People who had watched five years of bitter civil strife, largely instigated by the Dal and countless other Sikh religious factions, were glad to see them left holding the baby. But with each warring group claiming to speak in the name of Sikhism, the political scenario in the past ten months has been one of dog eat dog.

Confused Roles

Today there is no single group with which New Delhi can negotiate a new political accord. The Akali leadership has painted itself into a corner, and the chief minister (a Sikh) daily does an ignominious tightrope walk to placate fanatical elements on one hand and to function effectively as an elected representative of a mixed electorate not all Sikh by any means. He has found it impossible, however, to break free of the religious nexus.

He has brought the office of chief minister into disrepute by submitting himself to the high priests of the Sikh community. On their urging, he called in paramilitary personnel and police to cleanse the Golden Temple of terrorists. Having done so, he was promptly ordered to appear before them and receive a sentence of penance in expiation for having "desecrated" the shrine and hurt Sikh religious sensibilities! He therefore submitted to dusting the shoes of worshipers in the Golden Temple and smaller shrines, along with other penance. He declared he gladly undertook this penance as a pious Sikh, quite forgetting that he was voted into office by non-Sikh as well as Sikh electors, and therefore his position as chief minister cannot be transcended by Sikh religious sanctions. Also, in sending the police into the shrine he was dealing with a law and order situation, for which he was not answerable to the Sikh priesthood.

This confusion of roles can be traced to the nature of the accord signed between Mr. Gandhi and the Shiromani Akali Dal. A number of dangerous precedents were set, the chief being the recognition by the central government of a regional religious party as its coequal at the negotiating table. This negated the secular character of our federation. The accord was a sellout of the rights of the non-Sikhs in Punjab. To it can be traced the present insecurity which is making Hindus leave the state.

The accord allowed one religious group to impose its views on other groups, thus violating a basic democratic norm.

In handing power on a platter to the Akali Dal, the government conceded that violence and terrorism can effectively replace constitutional methods of negotiation. It also conceded that it was helpless to prevent shrines from being used as safe houses by religious terrorists.

The Anandpur Sahib Resolution

Mrs. Gandhi's inconclusive meetings with the Akalis brought into prominence a document called the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. She refused to endorse it, even though all the Akali rhetoric centered on it. But Mr. Gandhi agreed to refer the Resolution for scrutiny by a justice.

The political questions such as the sharing of river waters with states neighboring Punjab, the transfer of Chandigarh as capital (presently shared with Haryana), and the shifting of state lines on a basis of language, etc., do not concern us here.

But a closer look at some clauses of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution will give readers an insight into the kind of lunacies that keep Sikh militancy constantly on the boil.

The Anandpur Sahib Resolution was drawn up by a committee of the Akali Dal in eleven sittings over nine months in 1973. It was formally endorsed and accepted by the general house of the Dal in 1977.

The document justifies the Sikh obligation to carry arms:

> All those persons, male or female, who have not been convicted of any criminal offence by a court of law, should be at liberty to possess all types of small arms, like revolvers, guns, pistols, rifles, carbines, etc., without any licence, the only obligation being their registration.

Argued one Akali Dal leader, *Kirpan,* the small ritual dagger is no longer enough. One must move with the times and carry modern arms! Ironically, he was gunned down by his opponents. The Sikh have a ceremonial worship of their arms and regard them as their *pirs,* spiritual mentors.

Regarding the Sikh identity, the Resolution declares Sikhs as a separate nation and commits the Akali Dal to establish the political supremacy of the Sikhs, making use of "all possible means." The Dal also undertakes to mold Sikhs into a strong and sturdy nation, highly educated, and fully aware of its fundamental rights.

To achieve this end, the Dal shall strive for the propagation of Sikhism and its code of conduct, denunciation of Atheism, and preservation of the concept of a distinct and independent identity for the community. It will also inculcate fervor and pride in "their rich religious heritage," and to this end it lists ten duties to be laid on the faithful.

Among these duties is the affirmation of the concept of the oneness of god, recitation of Sikh scriptures, and renewal of faith in all the ten holy Gurus and the holy scripture. Preachers, poets, musicians will spread the faith after training in a Sikh Missionary College. Sikhs will be baptized on a vast scale, study circles established, and tithing encouraged. Respect will be generated for Sikh writers, intellectuals, and preachers. Other clauses demand control of all Sikh shrines the world over so that anywhere on this planet where Sikhs are found, the holy writ will run, emanating from the precincts of the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

This stridency is merely a reflection of the current mood among militant Sikhs in the state. Not surprisingly, it has provoked a Hindu backlash, with a number of armed groups responding with violence to attacks on members of their community.

The slide downhill in the state is alarming. Nobody knows who rules — the Akali Dal ministry? the five high priests of the Golden Temple? or roving murderous bands which belong to countless splinter groups of terrorists?

The hideous *jinns* that have been let out of the bottle are not going to prove easy to exorcise. If anything, Punjab should be a lesson to all those who naively believe that secularism means being polite about other people's beliefs. Religion and politics make a lethal mix, and Sikhs make no bones about it. Their militancy is a religious obligation. This was one aspect of the sect which perplexed the British during the Raj. They constantly dreamed of recapturing a glorious past. One author remarked that Sikh nationalism was a constant source of danger because it tended to give the Sikhs a "wind in the head"! I couldn't have put that better myself.

Cookpot Piety

January 1987

The religious slaughter debate in England had sympathetic echoes here, where cookpot piety is a matter of life and death. Indeed, were little green men to come in from outer space and do an in-depth study of this phenomenon, they would easily assume that in India the way to heaven lies through the human alimentary canal. But they would not find a single schoolchild able to explain the mystical connection between the process of alimentation and its often drastic effect on the spiritual health of the thing called *soul*.

When stunning was introduced into the slaughterhouse in Bombay, there was a great debate between the authorities and believing Muslims who feared high tech threatened their faith. However, in most Indian meat markets we still follow tribal conventions. On one side, you will find a row of stalls manned by Muslim butchers wielding cleavers on ritually slaughtered sheep and goats and offering this *halaal* meat to the faithful and anyone who fancies it for other reasons than religious ones. On the other side, you will find a row of stalls with Hindu or Sikh butchers selling *jhatka* meat from animals which have been slaughtered without the mumbo jumbo indulged by the Muslim process.

In cases of extreme provocation, you might find these same meat cleavers being used with great effect in a communal riot between Hindu and Muslim where none care to stop for the niceties of ritualized slaughter. Because of the Hindu veneration of the cow, Muslims handle the beef trade. Beef sellers therefore have their stalls out of the way where their presence might not provoke Hindus. Many Hindus, in their

turn, eat products from the pig, an animal so abominable to Muslims that they will not defile their tongues by taking its name.

In some families, food taboos are so strictly enforced that children turn neurotic about them and remain so for the rest of their lives. I doubt if there is any place on earth where the human gut decides between heaven and hell, and piety and guilt, only on a basis of what its owner inserts in it.

Eaters here are divided into vegetarian and nonvegetarian. In the latter group we have mutton eaters, pork eaters (obnoxious to Muslims), and beef eaters (obnoxious to Hindus). Vegetarians in their turn have religious taboos against various vegetables and things like onion and garlic. Some avoid certain cereals and lentils. Others avoid milk from a white cow; some will not drink cow's milk at all. We even have fish-eating vegetarians among the people of Bengal. Vegetarians might also eat eggs, but they must be vegetarian eggs, meaning unfertilized ones. Fertilized eggs, facetiously called "cock's eggs," are sexual rejuvenants, and priced higher than hen's eggs.

A Personal Perspective

I suspect that after sexual taboos, food taboos are among the most difficult to break without a lingering sense of guilt. I grew up in a family where beef and pork were taboo — but not for religious reasons. It was to avoid giving offense to Muslim and Hindu sensibilities among those who knew us. My grandfather, an English missionary, felt this was one way of avoiding the odium attached to Christians by both Muslim and Hindu. His small mission in a very wild and remote part of the Kumaon Himalayas had some high caste Hindu converts, but more were from the Untouchable or Dom caste. He insisted that no one should rear pigs, eat beef, or scavenge carrion, cows, and buffalo, the way Doms did in villages. As a result of this kind of conditioning, my father, aunts, and uncles grew up with a strong revulsion to beef and pork, turning a peculiar green even in their presence. We children found this amusing, having quite corrupted our culinary conscience eating obnoxious meats in boarding school.

Ironically, we were still regarded as the lowest of the low. Even the Untouchables regarded us as untouchable and a source of pollution. Muslims sat and ate at our table. But Hindus would not accept food or water. Uncooked food, milk, fruit, and vegetables carried no pollution. Cooked items did. Often high district officials on tour in the mountains, urbanized Brahmin or other high caste persons, gladly accepted

invitations to dine with us. This always appalled the local caste Hindus.

For almost fifty years my father had a Dom stonemason and his three carpenter sons working with him on building contracts. They never took food from us. On one occasion, when they were working on repairing our bungalow, they set up their cooking pots in the shade of a cedar in the compound. We children were racing around, chasing each other close by, and our shadows fell across the pot of rice on the fire. They promptly emptied the contents on the ground as polluted and unfit to eat!

In those days, poultry was polluting for caste Hindus, but Muslims, Doms, and Christians kept hens. Later, when the government introduced development schemes, only these groups took up poultry farming. I recall, however, young Brahmin schoolboys sneaking up to the house, buying eggs, and swallowing them raw. This heinous crime was probably committed from a belief in their exceptional properties as an aphrodisiac. Although Brahmins did not eat meat at home, they fed well on sacrificial goats in special rituals on temple premises.

In most cultures, where commensality celebrates goodwill and friendship, food unites. In India, food divides. It divides the high castes from the low, men from women, Muslim from Hindu from Christian from Jain from Buddhist, the obnoxious from the acceptable, the saved from the damned, the clean from the unclean.

In Bombay, we had a flat in a building bought jointly by a society of ten members. Among these were Maharastrians, Gujaratis Tamils, Punjabis, and a family from Karnataka. We were the only "Christians" and were outside the pale in terms of caste. Thinking that we all should share more of our social lives, the women planned a dinner to which each family was to bring a prepared dish. The vegetarians — all high caste Brahmins — cooked their own food and ate it at a separate table. The rest of us ate mutton and chicken, kept at a safe distance from the vegetarians. One family, the Tamil Brahmins, did not show up at the last minute. For obvious reasons, the experiment in friendliness was not repeated. After that, we shared only gossip.

I learned a great deal from the Tamil family, who were my neighbours on the ground floor. On festivals the woman of the family always sent me goodies, but I never reciprocated the gesture since I knew she would toss my goodies into the garbage because they came from a polluted kitchen. I was not allowed to step into her kitchen; however, on one occasion she rang my doorbell frantically to report with great anguish that the drain had got clogged and "non-veg" water from meat-eating flat-dwellers upstairs was flooding her holy of holies. She was appalled. I

noticed that now she had no objection to my sloshing around in that filthy water and trying to push a length of slender bamboo down the drain. When the plumbers finally dealt with the blockage, she washed her kitchen down with great thoroughness, had a bath, and then ritually purified the place.

Her husband worked for Lufthansa and ate meat, but only in restaurants, never at home. As an employee, he was given a fortnight's tour of Europe for himself and his wife. She told me she would never make the same mistake again. She lived on fruit and nuts throughout. They could not find pure vegetarian restaurants. Salads and vegetable preparations came out of the same kitchen serving beefsteak. Everything was polluted.

She was a very pious creature and frequently kept her alimentary canal clear from end to end for psychic effect at certain phases of the moon, according to planetary conjunctions and death anniversaries, during eclipses of the sun and the moon, and to ensure that her husband had a long life.

There is, of course, a very real distinction between ritual purity in matters of food and the cleanliness dictated by rules of good health and hygiene. Despite her piety, her kitchen was appallingly messy. Indeed, that "non-veg" water actually did it a lot of good. In cities one easily finds restaurants advertising pure vegetarian food for those who observe cookpot piety. This claim does not concern itself with grime, flies, and shabby waiters, or material adulteration of the ingredients used.

I once worked in a Hindu boarding school, founded originally for the royal young scions of small princely states in central India, but now filled with the sons of rich traders and middle-class businessmen. Two kitchens in the school mess provided vegetarian and nonvegetarian meals for the boys. They were well-distanced from each other to avoid offense to the vegetarians. Even on dinner duty with the junior lads, I was not allowed to step into the vegetarian kitchen where bare-bodied Brahmins cooked and doled out the food. One evening, I saw a boy signaling frantically from a vegetarian table. He appeared in acute distress. When I went across, he wordlessly held up the hideous evidence of a bone fragment which had turned up in a mouthful of his vegetable cutlet. So revolted was he that he ran outside and threw up. Investigation revealed that the high and mighty Brahmin cooks minced the vegetables in the same machine used for mincing meat without bothering to wash it out thoroughly. Ritual contamination was an on-going process in that school mess.

Because of the caste nexus, you will find that pious vegetarians

exhibit open contempt for meat eaters. Nevertheless, with the process of urbanization, many families who are orthodox Hindu or Muslim at home in their small town or village environment, break food taboos and dine on beefsteak or pork in restaurants. Hindus traveling abroad might also fall from grace in similar manner. The argument is that the flesh is not of the sacred Indian cow.

Many devout Hindus will not eat marketed brands of cheese because calf rennet is used in its fermentation. For them there are also vegetarian jellies and blancmange packings using china grass and agar-agar in place of animal gelatin. When Gandhi was prescribed vitamin injections, he stubbornly refused because they contained liver extract. The members of one Jain sect wear cloth masks and sweep the ground as they walk to avoid inhaling or stepping on insects. They eat before nightfall so that none might fall into their food when attracted by lamps. This is out of a concern for all forms of life. Nonviolence is actually the other side of the vegetarian coin.

Drinking water has always posed the greatest hazard to ritual purity. In villages, caste Hindus have their own wells apart from the Untouchables. This is now a crime punishable under the law, but it persists, unless the outcastes spiritedly fight for their right to equality. An orthodox Hindu must know which castes are "water-permissible," and which will pollute. If a non-permissible person entered a room where water was stored, the pots had to be emptied out. After an eclipse of the sun, all water and food is regarded as polluted and must be thrown out.

If there were some consistency in such observances, they might appear a little less laughable. But Bengali Hindus relish fish and are regarded with contempt by some orthodox north Indians who revere the fish as a symbol of the gods Vishnu and Krishna. Some sects of Brahmins in Kerala eat beef. North Indian Brahmins will not sit and eat with them.

When Marco Polo visited India in the twelfth century, he noticed that Indians always ate with their right hands. This is found in all communities, even today. It is because the left hand is "unclean," being used to wash oneself after going to the bathroom. Food is served with the right hand, gifts are given and taken, and even left-handed children are forced to conform though it might prove a traumatic experience.

There is no rationale behind cookpot piety. It is entirely in the head. But the pious have great faith in the psychic accretions of the human gut depending on what is edible and what inedible. Possibly Ambrose Bierce's definition will make a fitting end here in the way it levels all:

EDIBLE: Good to eat, and wholesome to digest, as a worm to a toad, a toad to a snake, a snake to a pig, a pig to a man, and a man to a worm!

"The Religious Slaughter Debate." In the *American Atheist*, edited by Robin Murray-O'Hair. August 1986, vol. 28, no.8, pp. 24-25. Austin, Texas: American Atheist Press. An account of a meeting of spokespersons from the Royal Society for The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and of the Jewish and Islamic faiths, held in Winter, 1986, in London, England. From the April 1986, edition of the British secular publication, *The Freethinker*.

Bringing The Sheep Home

February 1987

One of the more disturbing political ideas floating free at this time, propounded even by intelligent people who should know better, is the concept of a "Hindu" state. Once India is declared a Hindu state, all the many troublesome demons now tormenting us will easily go back into their bottles. The Muslims, Christians, Harijans, Sikhs, and neo-Buddhists (former Untouchables) will not be able to manipulate the secular ideal merely to promote their own interests at the cost of the majority's interests. All the regional conflicts now tearing us apart will fall into place like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. National integration will follow as naturally as night follows day.

The difficulty arises when one tries to define Hinduism. Intellectuals might claim there is no entity under that label. But the devout are prepared to lay down their lives to prove there is. Since Hinduism is not an organized religion, one cannot speak of Hindu fundamentalism as something inspired by a single revealed book of scripture like the Koran or the Bible. There is some talk of scholars putting together something similar, with basic tenets for Hindus to follow. Meanwhile, everybody reads their own interpretations into ancient scriptural literature, which suffers from the same ambiguity and contradictory defects as the Koran and the Bible.

Hinduism draws for spiritual sustenance on a vast traditional pool of beliefs and rites surrounding myriads of deities. There is no compulsion for any believer to follow one above any other. So Hinduism is closer to tribalism, insisting more on faith and mindless devotion, on meticulous ritual and custom, than on theology or dogma. Its monolithic character

is, however, easily discerned in its caste system — a socio-religious pecking order in which each group is clearly identified and follows its own caste duties. Sin occurs when these caste constraints are transgressed. And the whole system is dominated by Brahmins, a priest caste, who wrote most of the scriptures and reserved for themselves the right to read and interpret them to the rest. Abolish the caste system, and Hinduism would become even more amorphous in character.

Some of our historians claim that Hinduism is a modern phenomenon. Earlier, people were identified by caste and by sect — Vaishnav (followers of Vishnu) or Shaivas (of Shiv), Buddhist, Jain, and others. As a collective term, there was no such thing as Hinduism to identify a single vast religious organization. It was created by Indian reformers in the nineteenth century in reply to the disturbing inroads being made into the social system by the proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries. Centuries of domination by Muslim rulers had already drawn thousands away into the Islamic fold.

During the struggle for freedom, among the many ideologies of left and right, there were some who fought under banners of Hindu nationalism. They exploited the xenophobic Hindu hatred of anything alien and promised the reinstatement of ancient and traditional Indian (Hindu) values and culture. But, when freedom came at midnight in August 1947, as prescribed by astrologers, we did not see the resurrection of a long-dormant Indian nation, revitalized by a memory of a glorious past. The truth is India has never been a nation — except when united under British rule.

Without a historical tradition of unity and nationhood, we now have people suggesting that since we lack the political will, let us try a spiritual ideology. Let us revitalize "Hinduism" and all its rich cultural background so that even minorities will be able to identify with the majority's concept of nationhood.

Militant Hinduism

The obvious ambiguity is unlikely to impress Muslims and Christians who discern sin in syncretistic argument. The intellectual debate is up in the air. Closer to the ground, the developing trends are deeply disturbing. Among the most strident advocates of a Hindu state is the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a rightest Hindu organization founded in 1925 by a Maharastrian Brahmin and still dominated by his caste. It inducts children at an early age, demanding unquestioning

loyalty and mindless devotion to Hindu concepts. Its nerve center is in Nagpur, and here, as in cities and towns all over the country, you will find youths in khaki shorts, white shirts, and black caps, doing exercises, marching, and wielding quarterstaves in ancient martial manner under the instruction of adults. The RSS claims these daily morning sessions are part of a physical fitness program. But there is no doubt that these young people form the backbone of a fanatically loyal army of storm troopers. Most communal riots involve men belonging to the RSS. And though it insists it is a purely cultural organization, it will not enroll non-Hindus in its ranks.

The second RSS chief, M. S. Golwalkar, who died in 1973, provided it with an ideology and a constitution. He declared that in a Hindu state, Muslims and Christians would be second-class citizens without a vote. During the pre-partition riots between Hindu and Muslim, the ranks of the RSS swelled into thousands. Today its membership is rising again, drawing heavily on the orthodox middle class. It had been banned after Gandhi's assassination; the culprits were alleged to have RSS links, and mobs ransacked its offices. During the emergency, its leaders were jailed, but when back in power, Mrs. Gandhi leaned more and more towards Hindu nationalism and enjoyed the tacit support of the RSS.

The RSS concept of a Hindu state is one in which education should be based on "national" (Hindu) culture. Every Indian child, irrespective of his religion, should have a knowledge of ancient scriptural texts like the Upanishads, the Gita, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. All Hindu festivals should be national holidays and celebrated by everyone. Sanskrit should be revived and its study made compulsory. Indian history should be rewritten, with greater emphasis on cultural and social achievements rather than the deeds of foreign rulers. Cow slaughter will be completely banned.

The present disenchantment with the secular ideal set forth in the constitution comes from the absurd interpretations it has assumed. "My religion, right or wrong," imposes on everyone the obligation to put up with ridiculous claims in order not to hurt the sensibilities of any single community. Political opportunists, even including Hindus, give religious color to regional problems which then defy political solutions. The most glaring example is the Sikh question in Punjab. The Punjab Accord placated Sikh religious sentiment. In Assam, the Hindus saw themselves being reduced to a minority by a steady spillover of Muslims from Bangladesh. The appalling carnage, in which Muslim women and children were targets in a genocidal fury, was said to be engineered by RSS activists. The Assam Accord placated Hindu sentiment. The Mizo

Accord, however, was bitterly criticized by Hindu political organizations because the tribes in this sensitive area of northeast India are largely Baptist Christians. They feel that Rajiv Gandhi has set the trend for other separatist Christian groups to demand their own states. The Christian nexus in the tribal areas bordering China, Burma, and Bangladesh causes considerable disquiet among Hindu nationalists. Another sensitive area is Cape Comorin, where Roman Catholic fisherfolk outnumber Hindu and have suffered attacks from Hindus. In central India, missionaries, Roman Catholic and Protestant, are being confronted by aggressive Hindu activists anxious to stop the "perversion" of tribal culture. Muslim proselytizing has been funded by money from the Middle East. A few years ago, when news got around of almost all the Harijans of Meenakshipuram in Tamil Nadu embracing Islam and assuming Muslim names, a Hindu backlash was sparked off. Hindu activists in their turn set about reversing a steady erosion of the Hindu base in the region by converting them back.

The basic strength of Hinduism has been its lack of compulsion and its ability to accept all belief systems as different means to the same end. It has never prosyletized. This is now changing. We can now expect to see Hindu missionaries striving with padres, priests, and mullahs to herd as many sheep as possible into their particular folds. Heads will be broken and blood will flow where each one's god digs in his heels. The most aggressive missionary Hindu organization for this purpose was launched in 1964 and is called the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council). Its leadership is drawn from the RSS. Its hunting grounds are the same as those of other proselytizing groups — remote tribal areas and Harijan and other backward classes.

Setting Out The Bait

The sheep look for the same inducements that made them wander from the Hindu fold in the first place — material benefits and monetary gain. One Christian, a waiter, who dropped his Christian name and changed religions said, "If you have to live and die in India, it is better to be a Hindu. Besides, the scholarships, books, and money from the church are not so easy any longer."

Jehovah's Witnesses, preaching in this city, told me people often ask whether their church will provide them with facilities for studying abroad if they agree to convert.

But converting to Islam or Christianity is less complex than reverting to Hinduism. The problem here arises from the caste system. Nobody

can elect a caste of one's choice. It comes by birth. But if converts prepared to return to the Hindu fold demand the right to wear sacred threads and carry Brahmin names, we might see the emergence of a subcaste of Harijan Brahmins with the same odium of untouchability attached to them! A Muslim woman, discarded by her husband, turned Hindu. But the VHP could find no Hindu prepared to marry her. She finally found a husband, but he was also, like her, a Muslim turned Hindu.

The simplest solution surely is to dismantle the whole obnoxious superstructure of caste. But were this done, Hinduism would become even more nebulous in character. The VHP has therefore got around the problem by inducing entire villages to revert. These groups can then intermarry without problems. In time we will then find new caste groupings emerging, describing themselves as Muslim-Hindus or Christian-Hindus!

The president of the VHP, the former maharana of Udaipur, in an interview with a national weekly condemned conversions by Muslim and Christian as "an exploitation of the economically backward sections of our brethren. It has very little to do with religion. It is totally motivated by politics." This is a reference to our democratic system of communal vote banks in a complex game of numbers. The Hindus play it as assiduously as the rest. But when the VHP was accused of also acting on the same motive, he said, "Don't call it conversion. All of them were Hindus. There were no castes, no creeds. To be a man was the highest form. These people are just coming back to the fold. It is not conversion but acceptance."

If coming back to the fold, like so many baa-lambs and silly sheep, is going to hasten the dream of a Hindu state based on tolerance, equality, and justice, we can expect to see more blood flow where missionary zeal runs riot across the countryside.

The watchword now is "Be Indian — be Hindu." But, once more, what is a Hindu? The VHP does not quibble on the definition. It says,

> A Hindu is one who follows any form of worship originated in India, though residing anywhere, and who believes the problems of the country can be solved easily by understanding the Hindu way of life properly.

This definition includes all the schismatic communities like the Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs. But it pointedly excludes the largest minority groups — the Muslims and Christians.

Says one VHP spokesman, "Our creed is that Hinduism is a nation, a *rashtra* (state)."

Armies of The Just

March 1987

The obvious success of Richard Attenborough's spectacular film on the prophet of nonviolence pleases us Indians no end. After all, Gandhi is our very own mascot. One of our number brought him to a violent end for what were thought to be purely political motives, but that was a risk Gandhi ran. Almost forty years after that traumatic event, however, we are beginning to realize that even if no reason for his assassination existed, it would have been created. The conspiracy against Gandhi was, more truly, sinister evidence of a deep-rooted malaise in the Hindu psyche. It has now burst like a festering cancer and ravages Indians in the form of implacable hatreds and ruthless brutality inspired by bigotry and intolerance.

Gandhi stood between Hindu and Muslim for a fleeting moment in our turbulent history. He was easily removed. Today nobody and nothing stands between these two protagonists — not even a government with a will to act decisively. The desperation of the common man and his disillusion with the administration and police in times of communal riots have given rise to a new militancy in the form of organized brigades of the faithful, fired with righteous indignation, mouthing war cries, and carrying flags as they go into battle armed to conquer or to die for their belief. The scenario is familiar: armies of the just — in Ireland, Beirut, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Punjab — God's chosen guerrillas, all grown from small beginnings into monsters.

Nirad Chaudhuri, in his very unpopular book on us Indians — *The Continent of Circe* — has a chapter headed, "Janus and His Two Faces." It deals with the puzzling dichotomies evident in his fellow

Hindus: on one hand, their great respect for tradition and stability, and on the other, their uncontrolled bent for disunity and disruption. He further lists collective megalomania with self-abasement, extreme xenophobia with an abject xenolatry, authoritarianism with anarchic individualism, violence with nonviolence, militarism with pacifism, possessiveness with carelessness about property owned, courage with cowardice, and cleverness with stupidity.

Thus, even while sages are revered and worshipped for their rigorous asceticism, it is the warrior-king who fires the popular imagination. He is a saint who does not shrink from bloodshed in a righteous war. In the Gita, Hinduism's equivalent to the Bible, Krishna exhorts Arjun on the battlefield when the latter (even though he is a *Kshatriya* — the warrior caste) is assailed by doubt regarding the war he is about to fight.

> Looking to your own duty, thou should not tremble, for there is nothing more welcome to the *Kshatriya* than righteous war. The *Kshatriya* who obtains such a fight unsought, like an open door to heaven, should be happy. If, however, you will not carry on this righteous war, then, having cast away your own duty and your honor, you will incur sin.

Interestingly, nonviolence as a state policy is not advised in any ancient treatise on statecraft. Instead, myth and legend abound with accounts of feats of arms, ruthlessness, and chicanery in destroying enemies. Ancient inscriptions all tell of victories and conquests. The extermination of the enemy included their families and possessions. To avoid dishonor, thousands of women committed collective suicide by fire. The scene of such holocausts must have been horrifying.

Defining The "Foreigners"

Foreign invaders entering the Indian subcontinent through northern passes took advantage of the disunity and rivalry between Hindu kings. The Muslims came first to loot and pillage and returned to conquer, establishing the Mughal empire and uniting almost all the peninsula for the first time. The British consolidated it further into the twentieth century. As in Ireland, so in India, history plays havoc in tribal memory. Muslim heroes are villains to the Hindus, and vice versa. Inwardly, fanatical Hindu and Muslim sentiment has not moved forward to a combined sense of Indianness based on shared historical experience and ties of culture, language, and geography.

Indian Muslims are actually Indians whose ancestors were converted to an "alien" faith. But narrow Hindu bigotry sees them still as interlopers who don't really belong there. This defect in historical perspective is evident towards Indian Christians when Hindus tell them to go back to England — as if they had entered the country with the British.

Such xenophobia is particularly marked in communal confrontations with Hindus defending an imagined sovereignty. Nationalism here means Hindu nationalism, and patriotism must be a loud declaration from non-Hindus for Hindu culture and religion. Such fanaticism is called fundamentalism in cultures where morality is based on an inspired holy book. Hinduism has no such single volume. Therefore, its resurgence can at best be called revivalism. In character it is as rabid as fundamentalism.

Dharm Yudh — righteous war — surpasses other sinful kinds of war in its insensate brutality and overkill. The forces of evil must be given no quarter. Such wars need volunteers, organization, money, arms, training, publicity, and media support to further the cause. The same lunacy inspires religious militancy as inspires rabid nationalism.

The armies of the just that are being raised in this country are called *senas*. Hindu *senas* have harnessed the mystical cosmic power (*shakti*) of Shiva the Destroyer in private volunteer forces called the Hindu Shakti Sena, the Shiv Sena, or the Hindu Shiv Shakti Dal. The popular response to these goon squads has astonished and pleased Hindu leaders. Volunteers are between sixteen and twenty-six, drawn chiefly from the lower middle class. Their greatest number is in Delhi and the northern regions because of the Sikh problem and the preponderance of Muslim communities in the cities. But the rabies virus is spreading swiftly east, west, and south.

Like the Sikh *Kirpan* (short ritual dagger) hung from a holster, a Hindu infantryman is armed with a *trishul* or trident, after Shiva himself. Though less than six inches — the allowed lawful length for a nonlethal item of hardware — its three points are very sharp. A direct perpendicular jab into a soft portion of the enemy's anatomy makes it go right in.

Hindu nationalism is active also on other fronts. In 1985 a religious conference of nine hundred saffron-clad sadhus and ascetics in Karnataka took a pledge to fight for the purification of Hinduism and the spread of Hindu nationalism. Sadhus and ascetics are supposed to have renounced the world, but evidently the situation now demands that they set aside their vows and jump into the fray.

Membership of the RSS — the extreme rightist Hindu party from which Gandhi's assassins drew their inspiration — is growing by leaps and bounds. Temples and shrines are being built to become a focus of Hindu worship. Hinduism is becoming an organized religion with its attendant intolerance. Hindu festivals are celebrated with fervor. More processions came out in 1986 than ever before. Marching through Muslim neighborhoods, they sparked off more riots. Ahmedabad, in Gandhi's own state of Gujarat, saw some of the bloodiest civic strife after Hindus insisted on taking a sacred chariot through Muslim areas. This kind of confrontation has led to the increase of "ghettos." Muslims move into Muslim strongholds for protection in urban areas, as Sikhs have done after the riots following Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. And Hindu families from mixed neighborhoods have moved out to Hindu areas. This polarization is a significant portent of India's coming fragmentation from the bottom upward.

Hindu activists are not only reconverting Muslims and Christians, they are busy in remote areas persuading tribals to abandon animism and embrace Hinduism for the sake of identity. Here they are in confrontation with Christian missionaries who have found these areas fertile fields with people so impoverished they gladly embrace any religion that offers them enough to eat.

In an effort to correct the wrongs of history, Hindu shrines are being "liberated" from Muslim control. These were temples taken over hundreds of years back in Mughal times. One such shrine — reputed as the birthplace of the god-king Rama — was bitterly contested by the Muslims. But the Hindus won. Twenty-five similar Muslim shrines are on the list. Said one Hindu leader, elated at the public response, "What is happening among Hindus is like an incarnation. It is as if God is going among the people and beseeching them to free him!"

Rampant Hindu chauvinism has created a fear psychosis among minorities. Muslims have now raised their own *senas* — the Adam Sena, Ali Sena and Al-Jehad in Delhi and Meerut, and in Hyderabad, the Jehadi Lashkar. These volunteers have green tunics, even as the Hindus wear saffron. But they are also armed with a religious symbol in the form of a trident or *trishul*. They claim that the three prongs represent Allah's name when written in Arabic. The trident also represents *Ali Ka Panja*, the palm of Hazrat Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam, with the three fingers raised. The membership of these *senas* has grown in direct proportion to the Hindu threat. Mutual deterrence demands that both camps be fully armed for war in order to have some semblance of peace. But with any one side spoiling for a fight, side-arms

like ritual tridents, daggers, maces, axes, and clubs are easily replaced by huge private arsenals of sophisticated weaponry like rifles and grenades turned out by clandestine factories, or smuggled in with funds collected from Indians living abroad.

Were Gandhi to return to his country now, he would be appalled to witness the lunacy sweeping through it. Not only have his assassins been fully vindicated, even his nonviolence is seen as nothing but a spineless sellout to those who dare to differ from us. Hasn't history proved that wars are not won by his theory that "the end does not justify the means"? He will discover that he now has no real relevance to his countrymen. Indeed, if he wants to survive at all for posterity, he must be content to do so by remaining a box office hit.

Nehru, Jawaharlal. "The Discovery of India." In *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*. London: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Chaudhuri, Nirad. *The Continent of Circe*. Currently out of print in the United States.

Paradise Is for The Birds

April 1987

For Christmas a sister-in-law — once a Muslim but now turned Christian — sent me a slim booklet published by a new feminist press, Kali of India, Delhi. Titled *Women in Moslem Paradise,* the book is authored by Dr. Fatima Mernissi, professor of sociology at the University of Rabat, Morocco.

The introduction sets the tone of the book under the caption, "Women's Jokes are Serious." Mernissi tells of how the idea for the book came to her while watching a television program on religion with a male colleague from the university. A plump *imam* was detailing the delights and pleasures awaiting the faithful in paradise, details which so excited her colleague that he spilt his glass of tea all over his clothes.

Being a mere woman, Mernissi found herself unable to share his enthusiasm. She expressed a suspicion that there wasn't much in it for her. In the ensuing argument, the man's manner turned almost forbidding as he advised her not to joke about such serious matters. Thereupon she decided that was exactly what she would do.

Moslem women have a place in paradise. This is assured by the Koran. But in the Hereafter, even as here, their purpose is functional and their virtue unimpeachable. Each believer (male) who achieves heaven is rewarded with a *houri.* This is an exquisitely lovely creature, eternally youthful, ever-ready, and expert in the ways of love (lust?). Also, she is forever pure, meaning she doesn't menstruate. This not only makes her ritually acceptable, it eliminates the tricky physiological problem of unwanted pregnancies from irresponsible and uncontrolled sex.

Paradise is a land in which not only run rivers of unpolluted water, but also rivers of wine and pure honey. Fruit trees afford "spreading shade" for "raised couches."

> Lo, those who kept their duty will be in a place secure amid gardens and water springs. Attired in silk and silk embroidery, facing one another. Even so (it will be). And we shall wed them unto fair ones with wide lovely eyes.

Evidently the single houri promised in the initial text did not seem like reward enough to later writers. Imam Bhukari therefore raised their number to seventy-three. Imam Qadi, in his turn, was much more generous. He promised the faithful 4,900 houris each — seventy at a time already laid out on seventy couches. In addition, each houri has 1,000 willing maids-in-waiting. A total of 4,904,900 loving females all desiring satisfaction might intimidate even the most doughty and virile believer, so each entrant into paradise is assured of staying powers one hundred times his earthly sexual prowess.

Mernissi advises women of the Parsi, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faiths to also take a closer look at their particular paradises. "Check your promised wonderland," says she.

Although the Hindu belief in reincarnation contradicts the idea of a regionally located Hereafter, there are such places as a Hindu heaven and a hell based on merit or demerit. Hindus easily accept the apparent contradiction, and their hell is described as graphically as the Christian one, full of torment and retribution. But the Hindu heaven is not like the Christian one of massed choirs and harp ensembles on cloud nine. It is more like the Islamic paradise, complete with creatures provided for sport as the Hindu version of the houris.

For women, afterlife beliefs appear to be of enormous significance because men have written the scriptures and defined sin for them. Scriptural text combined with social sanction confirm their status as a subspecies. Women who disobey religious laws, scorn traditional roles imposed by religion, and choose to go their own way in matters of sex, marriage, and divorce, are unlikely to gain paradise. In 1985, a seventy-five-year-old Muslim woman set her entire community in turmoil by winning a suit in which she had demanded maintenance from her husband, a lawyer, after her divorce. Thousands of the faithful came out on the streets to protest, declaring they would not endure having their holy scriptures reinterpreted. Last year, Gandhi's government, bending under pressure from a rabid fundamental Muslim lobby within

his Congress party that controls a vast communal vote bank, enacted a law which throws divorced women in the community on the charity of their relatives and family. Gandhi now proposes to introduce a uniform civil code to bring all communities under one system of justice in matters of marriage, inheritance, divorce, illegitimacy, and adoption. But any community which has religious scruples about accepting such a code may continue to exercise its own private religious laws. This again places Muslim women beyond the reach of justice. Both pieces of legislation contravene the clause in our constitution which guarantees that all citizens are equal before the law, irrespective of sex.

It is inevitable that women's fall from grace eventually comes out in higher divorce rates, broken marriages, and bastardy. Statistics here alarm conservative males, who see them as an index of depravity among females. A divorced woman is a flawed creature, deficient in the virtues of piety and passive obedience. There is a stigma attached to her. Not only has she failed as a woman, she appears a threat to other women's marriages. She is seen as a sexual freebooter. These are common attitudes toward women whose marriages break up. They are sinful creatures indeed.

The Perfect Woman

Every society turns up its own male or female stereotype. In India we have the *Sita* stereotype, the archetypical wife. She is the antiheroine of the Ramayana, one of the two most sacred Hindu epics. Married to the superbeing Ram, she follows him into exile in the forest for fourteen years, is abducted by the demon-king of Ceylon, Ravana, and eventually rescued after being held captive for many months. On their return to the capital, Ayodhya, where Ram ascends the throne, malicious gossip is spread about Sita's chastity. Had she been unfaithful to her husband when she was at Ravana's court? Ram sends her away again into exile in the forest. Later, after she has given him two sons, he makes her undergo an ordeal by fire to prove she is still pure and chaste.

This theme recurs over and over again in our films and literature, where a woman is validated only through her unswerving obedience despite unspeakable physical suffering and mental anguish. "The ideal of life was joy and beauty and gladness in ancient Greece," writes one commentator of the Ramayana.

> The ideal of life was piety and endurance and devotion in ancient India. The tale of Sita was a tale of womanly faith and

> self-abnegation which charmed and fascinated the Hindu world. The creative imagination of the Hindus has conceived no loftier and holier character than Sita; the literature of the world has not produced a higher ideal of womanly love, womanly truth, and womanly devotion.

Please note the passive virtues of antiheroines.

And again,

> there is not a Hindu woman whose earliest and tenderest recollections do not cling round the story of Sita's sufferings and Sita's faithfulness, told in the nursery, taught in the family circle, remembered and cherished throughout life. Sita's adventures in a desolate forest and in a hostile prison only represent, in an exaggerated form, the humbler trials of a woman's life; and Sita's endurance and faithfulness teach her devotion to duty in all trials and troubles of life.

Today, with radical changes in concepts of family, rapid urbanization, and a growing awareness among women through education, more and more are opting out of the Sita stereotype by refusing to let their Rams test their fortitude through mental torment and physical violence. They are going to the divorce courts.

In a special feature on the growing number of broken marriages, a news magazine states that divorce in India is multiplying at an ever-increasing rate, with twenty-five cases filed daily in Delhi and similar increases in every other part of the country. The stigma remains, and the trauma is as bad as ever, but a woman still hopes for better options by breaking out. Ironically, bride-burning has shown the way. Parents of girls whose in-laws threatened her with death if she didn't bring more dowry usually turned away from her anguished appeals to return home. Now parents seem convinced that a divorced daughter on their hands is better than a dead one.

"Marriages are changing because women are changing — both in the metropolis and in smaller towns," says the report. "The long-suffering woman who stoically bore indignity upon indignity in silence is now largely confined to the celluloid world. The *pati-parmeshwar* (husband-god) has rudely been brought down to earth; he has lost the divine right of the gods to do as he pleases."

Arranged marriages are brought about by negotiation between avaricious parents looking for material benefits and dowry. This

unabashed horse-trading is endorsed by the planets, with the family astrologer turning up all the most auspicious signs and portents in the couple's horoscopes. That is all that is needed to cement a lifelong partnership. Given the piety and long-suffering patience of the bride, it hung together. Replaced by a higher expectation of companionship and sexual compatability, it soon falls apart. The marriage bond, no longer reinforced by religious sanction, is further weakened by the social acceptance of divorce as a better alternative to a lifetime of misery.

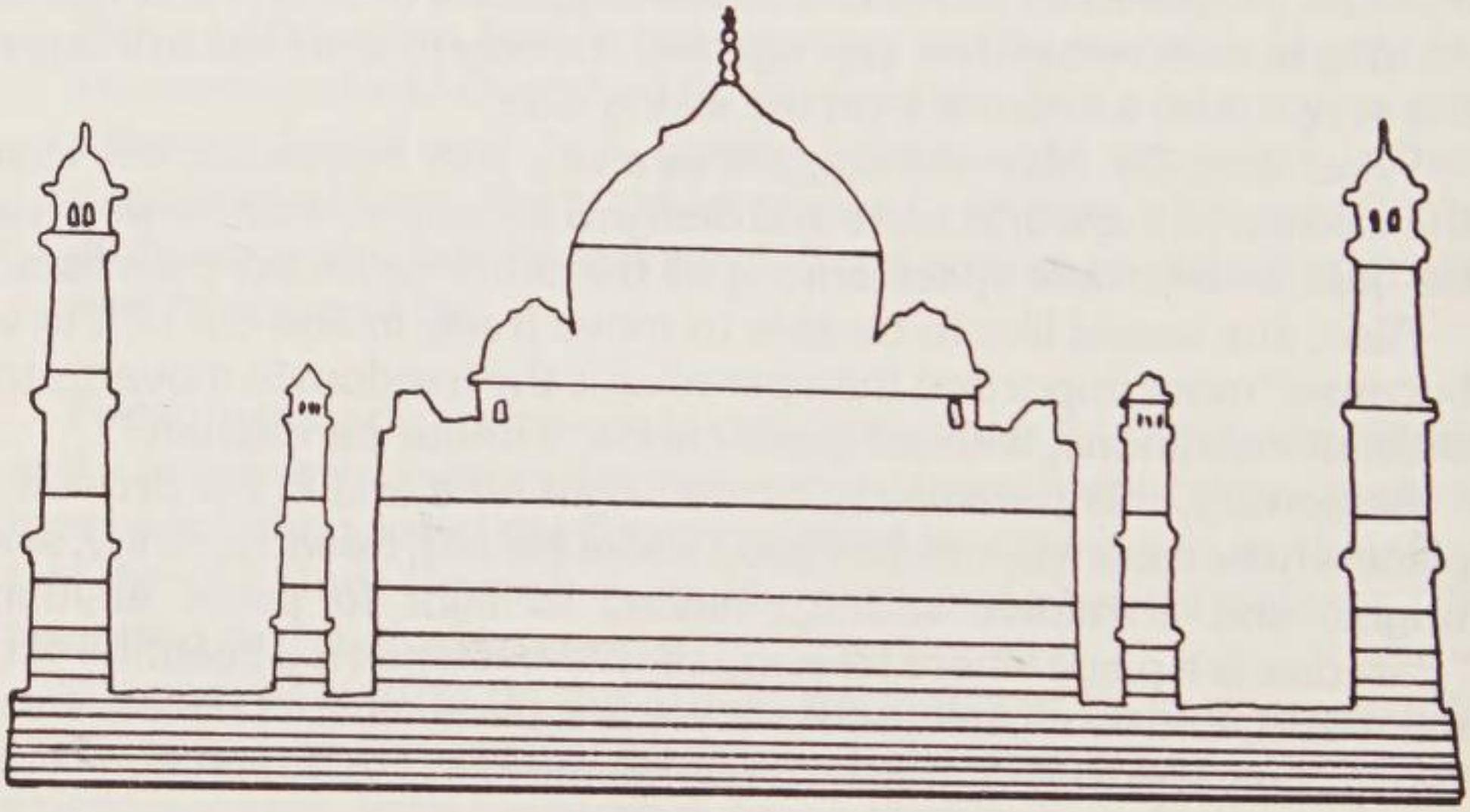
But, of course, these wayward and selfish women will not see paradise. And those who are destined by their faith to be reincarnated must be prepared to be reborn as lower species of beasts and insects. As long as men retain their prerogative, not only to write but to interpret the scriptures, women are on the losing side.

What does Dr. Mernissi suggest as a way out? She would like to see the women of the world unite and design a woman's paradise which will be "just an alternate space among all the other orthodox paradises."

Also, she would like to be able to move freely in and out of it at will because "more important than paradise is the freedom to move around without conditions, without qualification, without permission."

Regionally, this paradise is located right here and in the present. A place where a woman can feel good about herself, be witty, funny, sexy, bright, and attractive without having to fight to prove anything. "Paradise is a place where I feel my simple existence is a beautiful gift to the world, and to myself . . . Paradise is a place where I have a strong sense of my worth . . . Paradise is not having to live up to someone else's standards and expectations, even GOD's. . . ."

Mernissi, Fatima. *Women in Moslem Paradise*. A booklet. Delhi, India: Kali Press, ca. 1985.



Secularism — Eyeball-to-Eyeball

May 1987

Visitors to a certain mosque on the outskirts of the small trading town of Faizabad on the sacred Saryu River, just two hours' drive from the Hindu holy city of Benares (Varanasi), will see a remarkable display of Indian secularism at work. Right inside the Muslim shrine, under the central dome, within view of followers of a faith which is iconoclastic about idol worship, there is a platform, seventeen by twenty-one feet, on which the god Ram and his consort, Sita, receive the homage of devotees. For those who may doubt the evidence of their eyes, or even the unverifiable truth of hoary legend, a board declares, "This is Ram's birthplace."

But why should Ram choose to take birth within a Muslim mosque? He didn't, of course. The truth is: He was there first. The mosque came up later. History must now be rearranged to establish his inalienable right to be where he is. And for that, a posse of policemen stand by to see that Hindu worshipers have free access to the shrine. They must also see that no Muslim prevents what he sees as a desecration by heathen idolaters.

The mosque is one of the most dangerous flash points in the country today, where rabid Muslim and Hindu religionists seethe with anger. It is a fine sample of the kind of doublespeak in which people indulge when they stand on public platforms and declare that all religions are good and equal, but retain the private view that their own religion is more right and more equal.

Ram's birthplace was restored to him last year after many heads were broken and countless faithful killed by warring groups. There is no real historical evidence that the mythical Ram was indeed born on that exact spot, but ancient Hindu tradition located a shrine there. Then along came invaders of the Muslim faith, riding through the mountain passes to the plains of Hindostan, to loot and pillage the incredible wealth of the Hindu temples and smash their abominable idols. In 1526, Babar, a petty chief in Afghanistan, defeated the Muslim ruler of Delhi and founded the great Mughal Empire. He was a descendant of Chenghiz Khan and Tamerlane. The Islamic tradition of spreading the faith and slaying idolators played havoc in India between the two major faiths. Hindu tribal memory has never forgotten this violation of its ethnic psyche. Famous Hindu shrines were taken over and turned into Muslim ones. Babar destroyed Ram's shrine and erected an imposing mosque called the Babari Masjid. Other historical rumors, however, claim that it was his descendant, Aurangzeb, who committed the desecration five centuries later.

The mosque has remained a matter of bitter contention between the two communities. In 1949, a Hindu district collector of Faizabad decided to pull rank on Allah. Using bureaucratic clout, he installed idols of Ram and Sita on the exact spot, under the dome. Thereafter, he waged a stubborn battle with the government to keep them there. Dismissed from the civil service, he made a comeback by standing for election and winning a seat in Parliament on the strength of the Hindu backlash. By a court order, a lock was placed on the shrine to prevent further trouble.

Last year, on February 1, a biased court declared the shrine open to Hindus and had the lock removed from the iron fencing. Hindus, who could approach only up to thirty-five feet formerly, can now go as close as five feet of Ram. Here the priest, Lal Das, presides over prayers and puja. Muslims, on their part, may approach only within two hundred yards of the shrine. The yards, feet, and inches of the secular ideal of freedom of worship has been worked out with care.

Unprepared to let the matter rest, Muslim leaders took the issue to the streets and rallied the faithful throughout the country by setting up an all-India Babari Action Committee. They even declared a boycott of our most important national day — January 26 — the day on which we gave ourselves our own constitution and set up a sovereign democratic republic.

This move was interpreted as a telling example of the Muslim community's lack of patriotism. It did more damage than good to the cause. Moderate and liberal Muslims condemned it outright, and the leaders had to back off from the boycott.

Marking The Spot

Shifting the scene next to Mathura, the reputed birthplace of the legendary god Krishna, we enter an impressive mosque of red sandstone built in 1669 by the Emperor Aurangzeb. Here there is a Hindu shrine bang up against the mosque, built as recently as 1962 with donations from newspaper barons, but militant Hindus, who have also been active in the case of Ram's birthplace, insist that Krishna's natal ground is directly *under* the mosque. Both Muslims and Hindus claim they have authentic records to support their right to be where they are, but neither has produced these yet. Muslims are keeping a low profile here, because they are considerably outnumbered. But the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation continues. Any kind of provocation could prove a spark to a powder magazine. Regrettably, if the explosion comes, it will engulf the country — in faraway towns and cities, and the countryside.

It appears that the Babari Masjid controversy has been used by militant fundamentalists in the Muslim community to push aside the more moderate leaders and capture the imagination of the faithful as their true saviors. This belligerence, along with the fast mushrooming of small groups over the country and religious *senas* (armies), revives the memory of the confrontation politics of forty years ago, when the country was vivisected to accommodate the idea that Hindus and Muslims were two distinct "nations" and could not possibly live side by side. Hindus today argue that, since Pakistan was created for religious reasons, any Muslim here who sees his religion is at risk, had better pack and get out of the country.

Among some of the issues which have kept the community simmering with discontent in the recent past, one was the Supreme Court ruling that Shah Bano Begum, a divorced woman, had a right to maintenance by her husband. This compassionate move was denounced as an assault on Muslim identity and a denigration of the holy law as enunciated by the prophet. Also, the government has disallowed the conduct of prayers and services in old monuments built by former Muslim rulers. In addition, it has now placed strictures on the allotment of state lands for building places of worship. The fundamentalists also insist that school history texts are being progressively

"Hinduised" and the Muslim role in India's past belittled, if not distorted.

Also, the community is not given equal opportunity of employment in the civil services, police, and armed forces, nor even in the private sector. Their language — Urdu — is fast being eclipsed by Hindi. Indeed, the very identity of the Indian Muslim is threatened. This kind of emotional appeal has gained strong support from the rank and file.

The malaise is not confined to Muslims. The Sikhs are working hard at transforming Punjab into an independent theocratic state. Our much-vaunted claims to secularism ring hollow because weak-kneed government policies have always tried to placate bigotry by choosing the path of least resistance to avoid confrontation. In an effort to accommodate every religion, we find our polity being torn apart by every individual group bent on its pound of flesh. Indian secularism now means we must suffer fools gladly — or learn to live with them — eyeball-to-eyeball.

Psychic Shenanigans?

June 1987

About a hundred years ago, my paternal grandfather settled in the Himalayas, where he started his own mission. A few days' journey on foot from where I was born lay the high passes through snow-covered ranges to Tibet. And eastwards, across the Kali river, was the Hindu kingdom of Nepal. Both countries strongly resisted the entry of Europeans, even though the earliest explorers on the "roof of the world" were Jesuit priests in search of nonexistent Nestorian Christian communities said to be settled there.

My home lies on the ancient Hindu pilgrim route to Mount Kailash, the Hindu Olympus. Pilgrims making this greatest of all religious treks went through the Lipulekh Pass to the trading post of Taklakot, from where they traveled in groups to circle Mt. Kailashn and worship on the shores of the sacred Lake Manasarovar. Occasionally, British army officers and self-styled explorers ventured in, disguised as pilgrims. But the Tibetans quickly tortured and executed intruders who did not have permits.

For centuries, however, there had been a steady flow of goods through the passes without any political interference. Sturdy Khampa traders came down as far as our foothill towns every winter, carrying lac, borax, wool, rock salt, bodkins, and curiously traveling on zhos, donkeys, mules, and sheep. They bartered their goods for madder, wheat, rice, molasses, tea, and suchlike, and returned to Tibet when spring came round.

As children we were terrified of the Tibetans, believing they kidnapped children and ate them. This was just one aspect of the

complete ignorance in our region about these people; however, even to the rest of the world, Tibet remained a land of mystery and magic with a strange form of Buddhism for a religion — a vast, inhospitable country where a quarter of the male population lived in immense monasteries maintained by an impoverished populace, all governed by the theocratic Dalai Lama from Lhasa.

Frauds cashed in on the world's ignorance of the "Closed Land" of Tibet. Madam Blavatsky was in psychic contact with *maha-atmas*, great spirits, who supposedly dwelt there. Closer to our times was the British plumber-turned-mystic, Cyril Hoskins, who fell out of a tree while photographing an owl, was declared dead, and then revived to tell the world he was Tuesday Lobsang Rampa, the incarnation of a Tibetan llama. His first book, *The Third Eye*, was a runaway success, as were subsequent titles, proving you can fool most of the people much of the time.

Possibly the most remarkable material brought out on Tibet was by the French orientalist-turned-Buddhist, Alexandra David-Neel. Weird happenings she had witnessed were written about in *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet*, *My Journey to Lhasa*, and other books. She attained enlightenment by staying holed up in a cave for three years. Her accounts revealed what most rational people suspected: Tibet was a land steeped in ignorance and superstition. The altitude and rarified air had nothing to do with its supposedly psychic culture.

With the Chinese occupation in 1950, the cobwebs got blown away. The monasteries were disbanded; the Dalai Lama fled to India; the passes were sealed, and instead of traders, we saw hordes of refugees entering India. Today the traditional trade no longer exists, but Hindu pilgrims are once more allowed in limited numbers to go through to Kailash. The god-king of Tibet lives in exile in Dharamshala, and his people are literally scattered over India and abroad, much like the Diaspora of the Jews. And like the Jews, the Tibetans jealously guard their national identity and traditional ways, looking to a return to their homeland with all its pristine innocence restored.

One significant aspect of this sudden and traumatic thrust into the glare of the twentieth century of a medieval society based on a theocratic system of government is the growth of education. Tibetan children attend schools in their settlements, and scholars are sent abroad on scholarships provided by the Dalai Lama. Inevitably, with the Western interest in oriental flimflam and esoteric ho-hum, centers have now sprung up in countries where Tibetan Buddhism is taught and communities of converts flourish, subscribing to the belief in re-

incarnation, hell, sin and damnation, psychic claptrap, and much else.

Though the Dalai Lama wields power over all his followers, his position is not hereditary in the temporal sense. Succession takes place not by patrilineal descent, but by spiritual reincarnation. This sytem proves itself particularly useful in power games in monasteries and communities where small cliques are interested in grabbing control. When a Dalai Lama, abbot, or head of an institution dies, his soul enters another human body. Perceptive lamas on their deathbeds are able to tell their followers where to look for these incarnations. But other tests were also devised for finding this fortunate person. During the rule of the fifth Dalai Lama (the present one is the fourteenth), there was a state oracle of Tibet — a priest attached to a powerful monastery — who was consulted when a successor had to be found, or when a political decision had to be made.

Formerly, disciples made long, arduous journeys to remote villages on the plateau in response to signs and portents. The names of all children born nine months after the ruler died are noted and particulars examined on a basis of information given by the dead man. Oracles, divination, and meditation are used. The child is tested by an offering of articles — a rice bowl, rosaries, a ritual bell, etc. If the item for which the baby reaches belonged to the former lama, the search is reckoned to be over. The child is taken and reared as the next successor, guided and tutored by the disciples. His parents and family are in clover.

With Tibetans scattered far and wide, and non-Tibetans now part of the fold, the search for reincarnations takes searchers abroad. This unusual development was supposedly foretold in the eighth century by the Indian saint Padmasambhava, a disciple of the Buddha who took the religion to Tibet.

> When iron birds fly and horses run on wheels, Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth, and the Dharma (the Faith) shall come to the land of the red man.

Meaning America, no doubt. In 1975, an American child was found to be the reincarnation of an abbot from Sikkim. Now eighteen, he lives and studies in Rumtek monastery. We have a Canadian incarnation, in Karnataka state where Tibetans are settled, of an abbot from Sera, which was named after one of the three greatest seats of learning in Tibet before the Chinese occupation. In February of this year, we witnessed the appearance of a Spanish reincarnation, two-year-old Osel Iza Torres, who is to be installed as head lama of Kopan Buddhist

monastery in Nepal.

The circumstances of Osel's discovery are as bizarre as any. When the search began for the present Dalai Lama, his spiritual predecessor's corpse was set facing south. But it veered to the east. A star-shaped fungus appeared on the northeast face of the wooden pillar near him. Strange cloud formations also occurred in that direction. While meditating, the regent beheld the three letters *Ah*, *Ka*, and *Ma*, and the vision of a monastery of jade and gold appeared. *Ah* indicated the northeast province of Amdo; *Ka* stood for Kumbum monastery where this child's family lived in a village. The boy picked up the former Dalai Lama's walking stick, ritual drum, and rosary.

The Spanish reincarnation is small fry, however. In March 1984, a certain Lama Yeshe died of heart failure in California. He was only a *geshe*, a kind of doctoral scholar in Buddhist studies. His job was communication between East and West, for which purpose he established the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition in 1971. This has a network of meditation centers, colleges, and monasteries around the world — valuable real estate. Yeshe, a product of Sera monastery in Karanataka, founded the Kopan monastery in Nepal in 1969. Mrs. Maria Toress, age thirty-three, proud mother of the Spanish reincarnation, is treasurer of the Buddhist meditation center in the mountains of Granada.

Two and a half months after Lama Yeshe's death, she says she had a dream in which she found herself in an immense Roman Catholic cathedral with a thousand people. Yeshe called to her and led her to a fountain. He put her head under it so that water came into her, inside her nose and mouth. When she awoke, she felt the good Lama had been near her. Some days later, she realized that she was pregnant. I guess there have been stranger ways of women getting caught up even before this — when destined to bear gods.

As it happened, Lama Tenzopa, regent of Kopan monastery until the incarnation was found, also had a dream in which he saw the seven-month-old Osel. He also used divination, seeing signs in the fire at the Lama's funeral. He saw signs in the ashes. Of ten names he presented, the Dalai Lama selected Osel. Later, Osel astounded all by choosing the rosary which had belonged to Lama Yeshe. The next day, he latched onto Yeshe's very own belt. Maria, in her turn, said her son put his hands together in salutation while being shown a video film on his spiritual ruler, the Dalai Lama.

The whole exercise looks suspiciously like a take-over bid — which is exactly what the entire reincarnation hype has always been — except

that formerly it was all within the Tibetan fold. This new ploy of lamas choosing to let their spirits take up residence in Europeans and Americans could turn into a sinister racket. Some Tibetans doubt whether the Dalai Lama helped choose the Spanish reincarnation. They also resent the publicity being drummed up by Maria Torres and her husband Paco, a construction worker who will never need to work again as papa of the head lama of Kopan monastery. He has four other children.

Can we perhaps look forward to seeing a Western replacement of the Dalai Lama himself one day? The politics of reincarnation are highly esoteric and subtle. And with so much property, money, and power up for grabs each time a lama, guru, swami, or godman dies, there's no saying where it will all end. We've already seen successful take-over bids in the Hare Krishna cult, the Rajneesh circus, and other minor road shows. And we know from experience that man moves in a mysterious way god's wonders to perform.

Rampa, T. Lobsang. *The Third Eye*. New York: Ballantine, 1974.
David-Neal, Alexandra. *With Magicians and Mystics in Tibet*. First published in Tibet, 1931. Reissued as *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. London: Corgi Books, 1965.

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AMERICAN ATHEISTS ARE ORGANIZED:

(1) to stimulate and promote freedom of thought and inquiry concerning religious beliefs, creeds, dogmas, tenets, rituals, and practices;

(2) to collect and disseminate information, data, and literature on all religions and promote a more thorough understanding of them, their origins, and their histories;

(3) to advocate, labor for, and promote in all lawful ways the complete and absolute separation of state and church;

(4) to advocate, labor for, and promote in all lawful ways the establishment and maintenance of a thoroughly secular system of education available to all;

(5) to encourage the development and public acceptance of a humane ethical system, stressing the mutual sympathy, understanding, and interdependence of all people and the corresponding responsibility of each individual in relation to society;

(6) to develop and propagate a social philosophy in which man is the central figure, who alone must be the source of strength, progress, and ideals for the well-being and happiness of humanity;

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(8) to engage in such social, educational, legal, and cultural activity as will be useful and beneficial to members of American Atheists and to society as a whole.

"DEFINITIONS"

Atheism is the *Weltanschauung* (comprehensive conception of the world and of total human life value systems) of persons who are *free* from theism — *i.e.*, free *from* religion. It is predicated on ancient Greek Materialism.

American Atheism may be defined as the mental attitude that unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a life-style and ethical outlook verifiable by experience and the scientific method, independent of all arbitrary assumptions of authority or creeds.

Materialism declares that the cosmos is devoid of immanent conscious purpose; that it is governed by its own inherent, immutable, and impersonal laws; that there is no supernatural interference in human life; that man — finding his resources within himself — can and must create his own destiny. Materialism restores to man his dignity and his intellectual integrity. It teaches that we must prize our life on earth and strive always to improve it. It holds that man is capable of creating a social system based on reason and justice. Materialism's "faith" is in man and man's ability to transform the world culture by his own efforts. This is a commitment which is in every essence life-asserting. It considers the struggle for progress as a moral obligation and impossible without noble ideas that inspire man to struggle and bold creative works. Materialism holds that humankind's potential for good and for an outreach to more fulfilling cultural development is, for all practical purposes, unlimited.

American Atheists is a nonpolitical, nonprofit, educational organization. Another of its functions is to act as a "watchdog" to challenge any attempted breach of what Thomas Jefferson called "the wall of separation between state and church," upon which principle our nation was founded.

Membership is open only to those who are in accord with the "Aims and Purposes" indicated above and who are Atheist Materialists. Membership in the national organization is a prerequisite for membership in state, county, city, or local chapters. Membership fee categories are reflected on the reverse side of this sheet (American Atheists Membership Application form).

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Margaret Bhatty, b. 1931, comes from a Christian missionary family. She is a free-lance journalist and author of books for Indian children in English. She lives in Nagpur, India.

Though reared in a fundamentalist religious environment, she recalls that what shaped her as a concerned member of the human race was the warmth, compassion, and tolerance in her family background. She was encouraged to read and never denied the right to do her own thinking. The fear of hell fire and the necessity of guilt as a prerequisite to redemption was deeply instilled. What made her take a hard look at the conventional Christian concepts she accepte without question was the way they affected women. In this area sh was strongly influenced by Bertrand Russell's ideas on Atheism.

As a writer for children in a multi-religious society often torn b hatred and bigotry, she considers her greatest responsibility lies preventing the on-going process of contamination of young min with adult prejudice, by offering them sane, secular, and sensib alternatives. Her son and daughter are also Atheists.

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